

A Higher Fidelity

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A Higher Fidelity

by [sintra](#)

Summary

“C’mon.” Tori nudges him with an elbow. “C’mon. He’s cute. You can admit that one thing but you can’t admit this?”

Gritting his teeth, Ice thinks very carefully about his next words. “He’s...” he trails off. “Some would say that...Mitchell is not. Unpleasant. To look at.”

(Alternatively: the one where Ice and Mav learn to park bad, eat good, and love even better.)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

hihi this is my first fic in a long long while—did not expect to end my hiatus bc of a movie over three decades old but what can u do. enjoy!!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Something rearranges itself, the day they rescue the *Layton*. Ice can't pinpoint exactly what, but sometime between the dizzying relief of touchdown on tarmac and the even more dizzying all-night party that follows, something changes. He feels a little off-kilter, like he's two inches from his center and he doesn't know how to reorient himself. There's been a shift, somehow, without him noticing when or where, and the shittiest part is he doesn't even know what changed.

Ice tries to sort himself out the morning after the party in slow, methodical steps. He blinks awake to a skull-pounding hangover headache at 0600 thanks to the smuggled Absolut the flight deck crew let loose sometime between dinner and lights-out.

Ice doesn't even *like* vodka.

He crosses out the hangover from the *Why Do I Feel Like This* list; Ice has been hungover many a time in his life—he's never felt like this. He marvels at Slider's empty cot for a bit, surprised that he's up and out of bed so early, and then he shuffles out of their quarters and into the hall, trudging towards the showerrooms. Maybe he just needs a goddamn rinse, Christ.

Ice did not just need a goddamn rinse. He's squeaky clean and shining, in uniform and heading for the mess hall, and the headache's quieted down from an insistent banging to a calmer rattling, and something is *still*—

Not wrong, exactly. But not quite right, either.

Everything is as normal as it can be after a night of non-regulation celebrating, and something's still not quite right, and all Ice really wants right now is a cup of coffee in his hands. He goes through the motions, accepts the back-slapping and returns the head nods, lines up for a mug of coffee and three slices of toast. He zeroes in on Slider hunched over, head down and arms sprawled at a table tucked close to a corner and knows instantly what might make himself feel better.

"Ron!" he says, right in Slider's ear.

"Jesus—! Fucking Christ, Kazansky, it's too early in the goddamn morning to be an asshole." Slider, jolted from his pitiful drunken haze, aims a vicious elbow at Ice's groin. Years of dodging Slider's pointy elbows under his belt, Ice side-steps and moves to the seat across him.

"Never too early to fuck with you, Kerner." He grins and takes a sip of his coffee. "You look like shit."

"On that, we can agree on," someone says, behind him and to his right.

Mitchell. Maverick, with a bowl of oatmeal and a cup of coffee, banana tucked precariously between his chin and his chest.

"Mitchell," Ice says in greeting. He takes the banana from Maverick and sets it on the table. "Least you don't look as shitty as Slider."

He snorts and settles down next to Ice, immediately peeling the banana and dropping chunks of it into his oatmeal. "No one looks as shitty as Slider. Not even while hungover, just in general. Takes the cake every time."

Slider doesn't even deign to respond, just slumps back over, pillowing his head on one arm and flipping them both off with the other. Ice smiles and starts in on his toast, and everything feels correct again. Like his insides have just righted themselves in his body and he can proceed with his day like usual. The mess hall is starting to fill up, and early-morning conversations are starting to bounce off the walls.

"Oh, by the way," Maverick says between bites of banana-oatmeal, "I'm going back to TOPGUN."

Ice blinks. In front of him, Slider tilts his head until his cheek's pressed flat to his arm, looking at Maverick lying down. "You're what?" Ice asks, dumbly. Like he didn't just hear what he heard five seconds ago.

"Going back to TOPGUN," Maverick repeats. "Tomorrow, actually. Think I'm gonna try my hand at teaching." Casual. No-biggie.

And it *is* no-biggie. Or at least, it should be. They all have their own assignments, their own things they want or need to do, as is how the Navy goes. You complete a mission, you move on to the next, so on and so forth. If you're lucky, you get to pick what you move on to, and both of them got to pick. It's just that they picked differently, Maverick heading back to Miramar and Ice staying on the *Enterprise*. He has no idea why he'd thought otherwise, has no idea why his brain just assumed they'd— that they'd move on together.

Get your shit together, Ice. Maverick and Slider are looking at you like you've lost your damn mind, probably because you've been staring at Maverick for far too long in complete and utter silence.

"Oh," he says, because what the fuck else is he supposed to say. Even he doesn't know why he feels the way he feels right now, surprised and off-balance. "Good for you, Mitchell. God help your future students, though."

"Now *I* wanna come back to TOPGUN, just to watch this shitshow unfold," Slider says, snickering.

“You know what, fuck you both actually. I’m gonna be the greatest damn teacher that school’s ever seen, asshats, just watch me. Hey, Hollywood!” And he waves Hollywood over, who’s dodging and weaving between tables. “I’d make a good teacher, right?”

Hollywood grins at them cheerily, approaching their corner. “Absolutely not!”

Maverick scowls and pouts his way through breakfast.

They bustle their way through morning chores and rag on Maverick well throughout the day, and it’s all jokes and shittalk but that not-quite-rightness is back in full-force, settling in Ice’s gut like lead. The sky overhead darkens to a deep blue and then to a black, and dinner comes and goes in even more shittalking, and suddenly Ice is in bed, staring up at the water-stained ceiling. The propellers are a steady thrumming below deck, enough that he can feel it in his bones. Farther out, the ocean, lapping at the *Enterprise*’s hull. If he focuses in on the noise, he can hear everything: the low chatter of people in their quarters and in the hallways; the groaning, creaking metal of the ship; booted footsteps above and below deck. He loses himself in the sound and sifts through the day like he does every night, stops to examine that not-quite-rightness along with the events of his morning, and realizes something. Something he wishes he didn’t realize just then.

Oh.

Oh shit.

Chapter End Notes

and that was the first chapter!! thanks for reading & see you soon ^__^

(p.s. u know i needed to have that italicized oh shit moment. i had to im sorry. is it really a gay fanfiction if theres no italicized oh shit moment?)

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

in which the oh shit moment was not actually a real, true oh shit moment. sorry, it's gonna take a bit longer than that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

So, the thing is, Ice is what one might call an aloof person. Standoffish, if you will. Reserved, sure. Haughty, if you wanna be all rude about it. It's how he got his callsign: years of being called an ice-cold bitch and the nickname sticks. He acknowledges his reputation, and even takes pride in it. It's not a bad thing to be—steady, unmoving, unflinching. Solid. Not a bad thing to be at all, especially in a career like this one, where people are chewed up and spit out faster than anything. Getting attached tends to do more harm than good. So Iceman is a good name, and a good name for a guy like him—

—except when it isn't. Because in the rare, rare moments when he *does* get attached, well. He latches on and doesn't let go. Slider can attest to this.

Meet Ron “Slider” Kerner, the man who is currently eyeing Ice from his side of the room with a frankly insulting amount of suspicion. You know, the one that looks like the lovechild of two linebackers and was fed steroids all his life. They hated each other in the academy, if you can believe it: all bared teeth and snapping at each other's throats, up until Slider (who wasn't even Slider yet, just Kerner) caught Ice making out with a civilian around the back of a club in Baltimore, thirty miles out from Annapolis. Ice had clammed up after that, refused to look Slider in the eye or even be around him, nauseous with the knowledge that he had the power to end Ice's career, Ice's entire *life*, with one anonymous report to their instructor.

Until Slider cornered him after class let out for the week on a balmy Friday afternoon and told him that Ron Kerner might be an asshole, but not *that* kind of asshole.

They've been inseparable ever since.

Ice has gone to bat for Slider too many times to count between then and now, one instance of which ended up in a fractured pinky and a smashed-in Camaro (neither belonging to him, naturally). Slider calls it *severe attachment issues*, whatever the fuck that even means; Ice calls it *being a good friend*. So yeah, maybe he fluctuates dramatically between emotionally distant and unsparingly faithful—he's a character like that.

Leave it to Pete Mitchell to be the second ever person in Ice's life to move the needle. Maverick in an F-14 looking at six MiG's and no backup, with the only thing on his mind being the certainty that both he and Ice would make it through to the other side and come in for the touchdown. Yeah, Ice never had a chance. That hungry, roaring thing in his chest was already decided on the natural order of things before the rest of him even cottoned on to what was happening. A suicide mission, a promise, and a sweaty, jubilant hug on hot tarmac later, and now Ice had two men he'd do exceedingly ridiculous and excessive things for. Fuck his life, genuinely.

He says as much.

"Fuck my life," he groans into a regulation-thin pillow, Slider looking on from his bunk. He shifts upright and stares at the Gillette bottle sitting innocuously on their regulation-narrow desk, knowing full well that there is no shaving cream to be had from that little pump bottle, and that it is instead filled to the brim with leftover Absolut from the night before. Shitty, smuggled, cheap drink that he's tempted to down, because Jesus fucking Christ. Maverick Mitchell? The guy who thinks the world is his oyster and that it's his god-given right to shuck it with a machete? *That* Mitchell? That's the person he's going to go to bat for, for seemingly the rest of his life?

Yeah, he's gonna need that shaving cream.

Slider's eyes shift from him to the table, and then back again. Just as Ice is about to lunge for the container, Slider pounces. He wrestles Ice prostrate and pins him there, his knee digging into Ice's back. "You hate vodka," he says. "And it's five-thirty in the morning."

Ice tries to explain that, while yes, he does hate vodka, and yes, it is in fact five-thirty in the morning, desperate times call for desperate measures—and these are desperate times indeed. This is of course while Ice is very much still face-down into a pillow, and so he's sure this is all sounding like incomprehensible grunts to Slider.

“Uh huh, yeah. And explain to me why these are desperate times again?”

More grunts. Maybe a pitiful wail somewhere in the mix, if he’s being honest.

“Oh. Shit. Is this like a wooden fence situation, or like a Camaro-in-the-lake situation?”

Thoughtful silence. More grunts.

“Well, shit.” Slider goes quiet for a moment. “I mean, Ice—this was gonna happen sooner or later. I can’t be your only fucking friend, you know.”

Irritated silence, this time, to show that *yes actually*, Ice *was* planning on never forming any other meaningful human connection after Slider, and that Mitchell blindsided him.

“Yeah, man. That’s kinda how life works.”

A grudgingly conceding grunt, for Slider’s troubles.

“Okay, up and at ‘em.” Slider releases his hold on him and slumps over to the foot of the bed. “Little Ice made a new friend, my god. They grow up so fast.”

Ice just glares at him.

(Privately, gears in his head turning an’ all that, Slider doesn’t think this is a wooden fence situation nor a Camaro-in-the-lake situation at all; he thinks this is something completely different, entirely out of range from what Ice knows, and from what Slider knows about Ice. There’s something about Mitchell, is all, and there’s something about Ice around Mitchell. Except now he might never just know exactly *what*, because Mitchell’s set to leave this afternoon. Fuck.)

“Breakfast?” Slider asks, already slipping off the cot and grabbing his toothbrush. He turns to look at Ice, who’s sitting on the edge of the bed, white-knuckled and gripping the frame.

“Yeah.” Ice clears his throat and stands. “Yeah, sure.”

“Hollywood, you know it’s bad when Mitchell and I agree on something for once.” Ice takes the banana from where it’s tucked between Maverick’s chin and chest. “Vodka is shit. The only reason we’re drinking it is ‘cause it’s the only thing deck crew managed to sneak away.”

“It’s ass, Hollywood. It’s ass,” Maverick chimes in, commencing his banana-oatmeal ritual. “Sorry man. Ass.”

After fifteen long minutes of this conversation, Hollywood just sighs, no fight left in him to keep going. Wolfman, glad to be done with the incessant back-and-forth, asks, “Hey Mav, what time you leavin’?”

Maverick swallows a chunk of banana before replying, “Sixteen-hundred on the dot, Wolf. Ten hours and I’ll be able to drink all the non-regulation, non-vodka alcohol I want.”

“Well shit, now we know your true intentions, Mitchell. For the next generation of pilots, my ass,” Ice snorts. Predictably, Maverick flips him off.

“Fuck you, Ice. Two things can be true at the same time.”

“Not when it comes to you. Too complicated for your brain to handle. It’s okay Mitchell, no harm in chasing the world’s pleasures.” Ice’s smirk is the smuggest it’s been in a while. And that’s saying something, as he likes to get at least one smug smirk in every day.

“Oh, I’m not chasing, Kazansky—I’m running away. From you.” Maverick smiles at him, candy-sweet, and goes back to his love, his light, his oatmeal.

And something tugs at Ice’s chest, a queasy, uncomfortable feeling. For a moment he’s lost, unsure of where he is or what’s happening. The mess hall’s gone all muffled on him, the screech of plates and trays scraping against metal almost disappearing completely. Raucous laughter and jovial conversations, almost nonexistent. It’s like his ears are turned all the way down. But only for a second. Another second passes and he’s back, he’s in the dining hall on a plastic bench and he’s drinking coffee, and Maverick’s sitting to his right like usual, scooping up the last spoonfuls of his breakfast. He tunes into the conversation Wolfman and Hollywood are having, some gossip about an officer and a member of the catapult crew, and he doesn’t notice Slider looking at him a little too intently over his mug of tea.

They send Maverick off in the hallway by the office of the CO. (This is the farthest they’d let them get without following him to the flight deck.) Wolfman and Hollywood make their goodbyes, promising to stop by Miramar on their shore leave. Slider gives him one last final noogie and claps him on the shoulder. And Ice—well, Ice extends his hand out for a good, firm shake, except Maverick’s pulling him in by the arm and hugging him.

“Don’t get too boring without me, yeah?” he says into Ice’s armpit, because that’s what comes with the territory of being 5’7.

“Fuck you, Mitchell.” It’s the most half-hearted ‘fuck you’ Ice has ever said to him.

Maverick pulls back first, smiling up at him. He smiles even wider, suddenly, and riffles through his duffel, fingers closing in around something shiny and cylindrical. “Take my shaving cream for me, will you? Half-empty and taking up space; I don’t wanna bring it back. Think of it as my goodbye gift.” He holds it out to Ice.

Ice takes it, scowling. “I don’t want your trash, Maverick.”

“Yeah, well.” He’s still smiling up at him, softer now. Less nine thousand megawatts, more LED lightbulb. “Keep it anyway. You might need it.”

With one last clap on the shoulder for Ice and a wave for all four of them, Maverick walks out the hall and up the stairs, heading for the flight deck. They walk in the opposite direction, towards the gym, until Ice excuses himself with vague mutterings about a headache, that same tightness constricting his chest. He doesn't actually remember exactly what he said when he bowed out, just knows that he's back in their quarters with a half-empty bottle of shaving cream in one hand. He's about to throw the bottle out until basic logic and reasoning hit him like a bus, and he remembers that, actually, shaving cream is much more viscous than whatever it is that's sloshing around in this container.

Ice twists off the cap and doesn't quite comprehend what he's seeing until the smell hits him. Smoky like charred wood, and sweet like butterscotch. Bourbon.

He laughs. *Of course*. Popping the cap back on, Ice slips the bottle between the mattress and the frame of his cot. *Sorry, Slider. This one's just for me*.

Chapter End Notes

oh ice....u think what ur feeling is brotherly affection and devotion.....ive got some news for u (and seemingly, so does slider)

thank u v much for reading!! lmk what u thought! <3

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

in which slider puts ice under a microscope and observes him because that's his little guy goddamnit

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Okay, Ice is starting to lose his fucking mind.

It's like the nights are getting longer and longer, the more days he's spent on this godforsaken ship. And everything around him is getting louder, too—the steady hum of whirring propellers is a migraine right between his eyes, the people around him are seemingly talking louder than they ever have before, and the intermittent take-offs and touchdowns of the planes are white-hot bursts of noise, thwacking him squarely in the face. Even the waves are deafening to him now, no longer the soothing white noise in the back of his mind.

Worst of all, Slider keeps—keeps looking at him. Eyeing him from across the room, or across the mess table, or during drills. Even during goddamn flights. Ice can feel his eyes boring into the back of his skull right fucking now, actually. Right now, while they're 20,000 feet above the North Pacific. He grits his teeth and stares out at the never-ending expanse of blue, and waits. Sooner or later, Slider is going to speak up about whatever it is that's bothering him, and Ice is very good at waiting.

Minutes pass, and in the meantime, Ice thinks about how the hell he's going to fall asleep tonight when he's just been scraping by the past couple of nights. Maybe he can scrounge up some earplugs from someone willing to part with them, he knows Sphynx has a pair, or—

“Ice.”

And there it is.

“Yeah, Slider?” he replies, trying not to let his irritation (and his anxiety) seep through.

“Was just wondering how you’ve been doing lately.”

That was not at all the question Ice was expecting. “We— Slider, we see each other every day. We live together. We spend twenty-four hours together, seven days a week.”

“Yeah, but. You know.” A pause. “You haven’t been lookin’ too good, lately,” Slider says, crackling over the comms.

Ice scowls. “Well, fuck you too, man.”

Slider snorts and flicks him on the shoulder. “Not what I meant and you know it.” He doesn’t offer anything up after that, prompting Ice to reply for real this time. Asshole.

“I’m fine,” he sighs. “Just haven’t been sleeping well’s’all.” He can practically hear Slider raising an eyebrow in response.

“Any particular reason for that?”

Another weary sigh. It’s all Ice has the capacity to do, these days. “Slider, if I knew, I’d be sleeping like a baby every goddamn night.” And that’s the god’s honest truth.

Slider gives him a commiserating punch on the shoulder, and that’s that.

(He is, of course, unaware of the inner machinations currently unfolding in Slider’s mind; oblivious to the dots Slider is rapidly connecting in his head. He’ll come to regret this soon enough and look back on this day with a mild sense of foreboding.

You poor, poor bastard.)

June melts away in a haze of dizzying heat and July kicks off with a flurry of excitement—mail day. The first day of the month arrives with its usual fanfare, which is to say, grown men skipping around and twirling each other about like the pope's come to visit. Or Santa Claus. Or both the pope and Santa Claus, and they've brought along Ella Macpherson as the cherry on top. Guys tearing open their mail to read some words from their wife, or girlfriend, or parents; maybe a picture from a sibling showing off the latest addition to the family. It's sweet. It's the sweetest day of the month. After collecting his own pile from the office, Ice walks onto the mess deck and stares out at the sea of faces, just for a little bit. It's a sight: the hall is the quietest it's ever been, the only thing breaking the focused silence being a handful of sniffles here and there, choked back sobs from the guys who have been here for years. Even in a communal space packed to the ceiling with bodies, it feels intrusive to watch. Looking away, he moves to a corner table.

It's his first mail day, and he gets letters from both his parents and his sister—updates about the work they're doing on the boat from the former and gripes about med school from the latter, with some gossip thrown in there from the both of them. His mom doles out some polite shittalk about the neighbors (the O'Brien's, back to their usual bullshit) while his sister is less-than-polite, and says some truly scandalizing things about her fellow classmates. Tori, as unseemly as always. God, Ice misses her. Ice misses everyone back home, and is already mentally carving out some space in his schedule to write them back.

There's one last envelope he hasn't gotten to yet, with a postage stamp of a watercolor San Diego shoreline on it. He doesn't recognize the messy scrawl of the delivery address until his eyes catch the name of the sender in the top left:

*Peter Mitchell,
Naval Air Station, Miramar Way
San Diego, CA 92145
USA*

Of course he writes like a 5th grader.

Confused—and a little pleased, if he’s being honest—Ice runs his finger under the flap of the envelope and unseals it gently. Inside, there’s a sheet of legal pad folded in thirds, alongside what looks to be a polaroid photo. Ice brings out the letter first.

Ice,

I have so much paperwork to do. I am not doing any of it. Instead I’m writing to you (because I don’t wanna do my paperwork). Miramar is hot as balls just as we left it. They moved me into the instructor’s village this time. Damn the teachers are living good. Full baths and shit and we barely had working showers when we were students. I could get used to this except Viper’s on my ass for not doing any of my paperwork. I should get on that. How’s ship life? Boring without me? I bet it is. Sorry you aren’t being graced with my presence anymore but I hope this is a suitable replacement. Say hi to the guys for me. Don’t be a stranger.

*Don't do anything I would do,
Maverick*

His handwriting is slanted so far to the right it’s almost horizontal. Ice strokes the pad of his thumb over the blue ink and pulls out the photo, near-dreading what he’s about to witness in picture-form. It turns out to be a candid shot of Jester, conked out and snoring in an office chair. Christ.

“What’re you laughing at, huh?”

Ice starts.

Slider plonks onto the bench across from him, carrying his own pile of mail close to his chest. Immediately, Ice knows who it’s from, knows the letters are from Slider’s own parents and younger brother, and that the floral-scented one is from the highschool sweetheart he’s been seeing for almost a decade now, Jenny. Red-headed, five feet flat, and sharp as a tack—Slider’s been meaning to propose to her for over a year, except he keeps saying he hasn’t found the right time for it yet. (Ice thinks he’s being a little bitch, and that he should’ve proposed a while and a half ago.)

“What—nothing. Mitchell says hi.” Ice flips the photo over to show Slider, who snorts, digging into his own mail.

“You guys keeping correspondence now?”

Ice shrugs. “I guess. I think he was bored, I dunno.”

Pulling out the letter from his parents first, Slider settles into his seat and begins to read.
“You gonna send anything back?”

What is this, an interrogation session? “Yeah, probably.” Ice narrows his eyes, except Slider’s not looking at him. “We’re friends. Why not?”

Like he senses that Ice is getting testy, Slider backs off. “Nothing, nothing. Nice that you guys are keeping in touch,” he says, as nonchalant as ever. He finishes scanning his parents’ letter and moves on to the next one.

Knowing the briefing for their morning hop is going to start any minute now, Ice collects his mail and raps his knuckles against the table. “Hey, I’m gonna head back and put this in the room. We have preflight in five.”

Slider waves him off with a distracted hum.

Ready room #3 is Ice’s least favorite ready room. Technically, they’re all identical, nine square rooms for nine square squadrons, with the same kind of armchair seats and the same scratched-up whiteboard in front, but there’s just something about number three. The buzzing fluorescent tubes maybe, or the whiteboard with the ink stain that won’t go away no matter how many times Ice scrubs at it with a rag. Or maybe it’s the throbbing migraine he gets every single time he steps into this goddamn room, because Wolfman and Sundown are at each other’s throats every day that they’re within these four walls, without fail.

Like right now.

“No, dumbass, of course we’re not leaving before squad four drops the package—” and Sundown gets into Wolfman’s face for this, straining up to look him in the eye.

“Did you not read the mission briefing? That’s the quickest way we can get in and out, and you’d see that if you took your head outta your ass for five seconds—” Ice stops listening at this point. They’re doing some kind of dance where Wolfman’s bending at the knees to glare at Sundown, who in turn is almost on his tiptoes, looking an inch away from clobbering Wolf on the head. Ice is sure they mean for it to look aggressive and manly, but they’re failing at it terribly.

Tuning them out to the best of his ability, he crosses the room to sit in the back, already feeling the beginnings of a headache thrumming away at his skull. A couple of the guys already sitting down give him a nod and a commiserating look, and he nods back, all of them united in miserable understanding. Lord, give him the patience to sit through this briefing without throwing Wolfman and Sundown into the Pacific. Never has his restraint been so tested than at half-past seven in the morning, with two idiots going at it in a small, enclosed space for extended periods of time. This is a regular occurrence. So regular, in fact, that when Slider walks into the briefing room, he almost walks back out on instinct alone.

“Again?”

Ice grunts in response. Slider sinks into the chair beside him, eyes flicking from Sundown to Wolfman and back again, like he’s watching a tennis match. He’s distinctly more amused by this than Ice is, and Ice hates him for it. He scans the room and leans into Ice’s side, mumbling, “They’re fucking, you know.”

Ice startles. Again. The second time in under an hour, damn. He’s off his game today. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Slider raises an eyebrow at him, as if in disappointment Ice has no idea what he’s on about. “Sundown and Hollywood. Fuckin’. Smashing. Banging. Doing the do. Taking the dog on a walk and—”

“I got that,” Ice snaps. “I meant, how the fuck would you know that?”

“You serious?” Slider says, incredulous. “Look at them.”

And Ice does, watching the two still bickering from across the room. Their faces have gotten progressively closer—they’re so close now that if Sundown tilted his head a little bit to the left, their noses would be touching.

Huh.

“Shit,” Ice says, a little astonished, and a lot pissed at himself for not noticing sooner. “I never would’a thought.”

Slider snorts and leans back in his chair, closing his eyes. “Not surprised. You’re not exactly the sharpest tool in the shed when it comes to shit like this.”

“What the fuck?” Ice scowls at him. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Not the sharpest tool in the shed, are you kidding him right now? Since when was Slider the leading expert in romantic relations all of a sudden? Fucker can’t even propose to his girlfriend and he’s ragging on Ice. But before Slider can respond, the CO and XO walk in, and they all stand at attention, conversation forgotten.

The mission is quick and painless, as routine as morning chores. They flew as back-up for a cargo plane dropping off supplies over the Cook Inlet, and the whole cycle coming-and-going took less than ninety minutes. As mundane as could be.

Sundown and Wolfman are arguing about something-or-other, smack-dab in the middle of the room, when Ice walks in for post-flight.

Jesus fucking Christ. He’s had enough of this shit.

“Boys.” He’s half as loud as they are, yet his voice carries over to reach them, cutting off whatever bullshit they were going to spout next. “We accomplished the mission. We did what we were supposed to do, and in less time than expected. That was the smoothest ride we’ve had in a month.” He keeps his face impassive, even if all he wants to do is bash their heads together and chain them to the engine room. “Everyone’s sick of your shit. Shut the fuck up, or I’ll have one of you transferred to a different squadron, and you’ll never have to look at each other ever again.” He’s bullshitting. Of course he’s bullshitting. Ice has neither the sway nor the authority to implement a transfer, but they don’t know that.

Suitably chastised, both Wolfman and Sundown give each other one last glare and back off, huddling into their own separate corners. Coming from behind, Hollywood gives him an appreciative slap on the back and settles into his own seat.

Peace and quiet. Fucking finally.

Postflight wraps up miles calmer than it started, and the squad’s in good spirits after the easy hop. They settle in to watch a movie before midday meal, and Bulldog pops his Scarface tape into the VCR.

A collective groan rises up from the group.

“This is the fourth time we’re watching Scarface, man,” Bulldog’s RIO, Sphynx, says. “Literally anything else, Bull. Anything at all.”

“But it’s a classic.” Bulldog frowns at them, eyes going wide. Damn. This is why he keeps getting away with making them rewatch Scarface over and over again. “Say hello to—”

“—my little friend,” the room finishes for him, all the fight seeping out of them. Fucking Bulldog.

Ice doesn't even really mind—he was planning on writing back to his family around this time anyway. Pulling out a stack of ruled paper and a ballpoint from the closet behind him, he starts to write.

Around the time that Tony Montana gets charged with tax evasion, which is also around the time most of the guys in the room start to conk out, Ice finishes up the letters he's sending back to his parents and sister. He gives them a rundown on what's happened in the past month and doles out his usual reassurances: yes, he's doing completely fine; yes, he's eating well; yes, he's getting enough sleep; no, he doesn't know when he can come back home but he misses them like crazy. Only one of these is a lie. They don't need to know about Ice sneaking up to the flight deck at night to stare at the sky instead of sleeping—he can only imagine the transcribed mother-henning he would get if they knew. His dad would probably find a way to sneak in flurazepam in the envelope. God love 'em, but Ice can deal with it on his own.

He seals both envelopes and tucks them into his pocket, staring at the last blank sheet of paper waiting for him. Mitchell's.

This is a lot harder than he thought it would be. Ice has no problem speaking to Mitchell in person, because bitching at someone and stepping on their nerves is easy, and easier if that someone is a hothead like Maverick. Letters, though? There's no one to bounce off of, no visual cues to gauge irritation or annoyance. No response. Just you and a pen, and a page to fill.

Empty-handed and out of topics to write about, Ice starts from the beginning.

Ice,

Got your letter. I was right. Life does seem pretty shit without me. At least you got Wolfman and Sundown to shut up. Hopefully for good. And no it's not just you. Slider does sound like he's acting weird. Why don't you try asking him about it? Go and talk to him like a normal person instead of trying to Sherlock Holmes it outta him you fucking weirdo.

Things are going okay here. The new batch of students are in town and we're set to start classes next week. I've got a lesson plan and everything. They'll be doing loop-de-loops by the time you get this. Look at me Kazansky. Organized and responsible and shit. Who woulda thought?

P.S. I can't sleep sometimes too. Lately I've started doing a thing my mom used to do for me when I was little. I add a spoonful of honey to some warm milk and down that shit right before bed. I don't know why but it works for me and I'm passed out at 2300 on the dot every time. Give it a try. The mess deck's open 24 hours for a reason.

*Sleep tight,
Maverick*

And with the letter, another picture: milk bubbling in a pot, with a jar of honey sitting on the counter by the stove. Looks like Mitchell's getting into the whole photography thing.

Later that evening, Ice asks for a cup of heated milk from a mess cook and heads over to the condiments table, squeezing a little honey into the mug.

An hour after midnight rations, he's out like a light. It's the best sleep he's had in months.

Chapter End Notes

ice babygirl its not the milk thats putting u to sleep. goddamn can we skip to the good part already whats the hold up (ice. ice is the hold up.)

thanks for reading as always! <3

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

in which slider is the realest one in the game, ice freaks out a little (a lot), and the boys come home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Maverick says that for him, flying feels like salvation. It's a swoop in your belly, he says. Heart in your throat. Endless sky and the sprawling earth below, and a 20,000-foot drop. There's no oxygen up there, and there's no thinking, either—what's left is the feeling and the doing, with no room for anything else. He says it's freefall without the falling.

Ice asked him in a letter, once, what he was being saved from. Ice also told him he didn't know Mav was such a poet. He didn't respond to Ice's question, but he did draw him a crude middle finger for the smart comment.

It's different for Ice. Flying isn't a feeling for him—it's not a jolt in the chest, and it's not a rush in the blood. It's knowing, and understanding, and seeing in real-time as a roadmap constructs itself in your mind. It's a wick sticking out of a candle with a matchbox in your hand; a knocking engine with spark plugs in the trunk. A thousand different things that can go wrong up in the air, and a thousand different ways to make them right. For Ice, it's complete awareness of himself, and of the plane, and of himself in the plane; awareness of Slider in the back and in his ear, and of the sky curving around them.

He said as much to Maverick, in the letter he sent two months ago. In return, he received a doodle of himself (at least, he assumes it's himself, what with the spiky hair and the incredibly exaggerated frown on the stickman's face) in a plane, flying towards the sun. It would've almost been cute, if you disregard the fact that Mitchell decided to abandon all laws of physics when he drew Ice's legs sticking *through* the belly of the plane, circles for feet dangling in mid-air. And the fact that Ice is flying the plane so close to the sun it looks like he's about to commit suicide-by-incineration. Ice called Mav a poet, not an artist.

That very same doodle has made a home in Ice's closet, stuck to the door of his wardrobe with some tack he stole from the office. It's in good company, surrounded by the photos Mav sent along with his mail. The milk, and two different photos of the sea: one at sunrise, and one at sunset. His favorite, though, is the latest one; came along with the letter he received a week ago. It's a shot of two F-14's in the sky, chasing each other—Mav said it was a challenge he had his students do, a frankenstein game of tag and hide-and-seek up in the air. Apparently, Viper not only approved it, but has since added it to the permanent roster of drills they'll be doing. Maverick's thrilled about it. He says he named it *Fun Times & Blue Skies with Mav*. He is the only one that calls it that.

Five different photos for the five months they've been writing to each other. (Ice refuses to have the shot of Jester up on the door, no matter how much Slider pleads for it). The first of the month is a good day, a sweet day—he gets some words from his parents, his sister, from Mav, and a new picture to tack up in his closet. Less good, maybe, due to the fact that every time a new photo appears on Ice's closet door, Slider gets this look on his face that vaguely reminds Ice of the expression he's seen vets with PTSD wear. It's the look on Slider's face now, across from him, in the middle of morning meal.

Ice has learned over the past couple of months that asking Slider to spit it out is not effective, and likely never will be. They're irritatingly similar like that. Well, two can play at that game: his current course of action is to stare back in silence. Sometimes Ice thinks that a day will come when they'll just sit and stare at each other, completely silent, and stare and stare and stare until they die.

“Ice.”

But that day is not today.

He sets down his coffee and laces his fingers together. “Slider.” They look at each other some more. It's so early in the morning that the mess deck's three-fourths empty, the only thing filling the empty silence being low murmuring from a couple tables over, and the distant clatter of pots and pans from the galleys.

“We need to talk,” Slider says, unusually serious. Faraway alarm bells start ringing somewhere in the depths of Ice's mind. Some shit is about to go down, and he has no idea if he's prepared for it.

“We obviously do.” Ice tries to glean something, anything, from Slider’s face. It’s a bust—he can be as unreadable as Ice, when he wants to be.

And for the first time since Ice has known him, Slider looks—not uncomfortable, exactly. Something bordering on cautious. Whatever’s been plaguing Slider for the better part of six months—it’s something weighty. It matters. It matters to Slider, and it looks like it’s going to matter to him, too. Slider takes a breath, deep on the inhale, and Ice realizes—it’s nervousness. He’s nervous.

“You like Mitchell,” Slider says, completely blank-faced. The alarm bells cut off instantly, and Ice feels the beginnings of a smile creeping up his face.

“Oh,” he says, full-on laughing now, “that’s it? Shit, man, you got me all worked up over nothing.” He gets one last snort out and says, “All that build-up for one joke, though. Christ, Slider.”

Slider isn’t smiling. Isn’t doing much of anything, really, just looking at him steadily. “Do I look like I’m laughing, Kazansky?” Ice’s snickering dies down until all that’s left is the murmuring, and the pots and pans, and the shuffle of feet moving into the mess hall.

“I’m being serious here, Ice, and—”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Ice cuts him off. He shakes his head a little, as if it’ll help clear his ears, unscramble his mind, make Slider take back what he’s already said.

“You like Mitchell,” Slider says quietly. Calmly. Scanning the room around them.

“Course I like him, Slider, he’s a good friend of mine. Against all odds.”

Slider gives him a long look, unblinking. “You know that’s not what I’m talking about here.”

The alarm bells are back, except it's a blaring instead of a ringing this time, and his jaw is clenched so tight his molars are starting to ache. "Look, Slider, I don't know where the hell you got that from—"

It's Slider who cuts him off, this time. "I didn't say that as a question, Ice. That was a statement. You like him." He glances at the sharp jut of Ice's jaw. "I don't mean this as an accusation. It's just—I've watched you for months, man. Months."

Ice has nothing to say. Swirling, staticky thoughts, shrieking alarms, a hurricane of emotion he doesn't have a chance in hell of parsing—they all build and build and build in his chest. He tries not to give himself away. It doesn't matter: Slider knows him far too much; has known him for far too long. One last try. "I don't—"

"Don't." Slider raises a hand to shut him up, exhaling sharply through his nose. "We've known each other a while now, Ice. We don't bullshit each other. We're not gonna start now."

The mess is filling up quick; Ice spots a couple guys beelining for their table in the corner of his eye, but before he can say anything, Slider barks, "No. Go away." It turns out to be Hollywood and Wolfman, with Sundown trailing not far behind. Not even a hitch in their step, the three of them do an about-face and walk the direction they came in perfect synchronization, clearly sensing that something is going down at their usual spot and not wanting to get involved.

Another deep breath from Slider. "You like Mitchell," he repeats for the fourth time. "You like him, and I know because I live with you, and I know because I'm the closest friend you've got. You were really fucked up about him leaving, up until he started writing to you—then you started sleeping better. Every time mail day rolls around, you wake up at the asscrack of dawn to be first in the office for mail call. Yeah, it's partly because of your family, but it's also because of Mitchell, and I know this 'cause when you read his letters specifically, you run your fingers over the words like you can feel them. I woke up in the middle of the night once and saw you rereading one of his letters with a flashlight. A *flashlight*, Ice, like a lovelorn sailor castaway at sea. It takes you at least three drafts for every single fucking thing you send him—*three*, Ice." He runs out of breath, chest heaving, looking at Ice with an almost manic glint in his eye. "You put up his pictures on the inside of your closet and you look at them for a little bit, every single morning and night when you dress."

Ice isn't looking at him anymore. He's barely even listening. There's a tightness strung across his shoulders and his arms have locked themselves to his sides. He's in the kind of stance you'd expect from someone waiting for a blow. Hell, maybe he is. Static, and alarms, and a hurricane.

"Hey." A hand grasps his arm tight. "Ice. Look at me."

And Ice does. No matter the state he's in, he's a soldier: he follows orders. Slider is staring at him, gaze unwavering. Ice has always liked that about him. If nothing else, Slider's as steady as a rock.

"I'm not saying this to embarrass you," he says. "I'm not. I'm saying this because you're the closest friend I've got, and I want you to be happy, and Mitchell is a good guy. A dumbass, but a good guy. One of the best." He's still gripping Ice's arm like he's afraid he'll slip away if he doesn't. "I think you'd be good together. And I think deep down, you think that too."

"Slider," he starts, and then stops. How is he supposed to explain that everything he's been pushing down inside himself, all the things he's compressed and shoved into a box and put into a corner, his best friend has just dragged out into the light? There is a terrible, hungry thing living inside of him, and he's been starving it his whole life. He has to. There are too many things to do, to complete, to achieve—too many things at risk. Asceticism is what governs his entire life; the borders of his existence sharp and defined. What he is to do and not to do, clear and pronounced and obvious. Maverick Mitchell is firmly in the 'not to do' column, lit up in glowing neon. Ice knows this now and knew this then, the very first day he saw Maverick across the bar, eyes gleaming something wicked. Ice knows what he is to do and what he is not to do, and he's a soldier: he follows orders.

He opens his mouth to attempt an explanation, an excuse, anything at all, but Slider is his oldest, dearest friend, and he sees Ice in all his fumbling totality. "I know," he says, giving Ice's arm one last squeeze before dropping it, "I know. He's straight, or there's things he wants to accomplish, or there's things you want to achieve. There's things you just can't do. I know what you're thinking, and—you know what, you're right. For all of it. Just—" he sighs, and all of a sudden, Slider looks much, much older than he is. He picks up his mug, tea long gone cold, and looks at Ice long and steady. "Fuck, man. I read Jenny's letters and I catch myself in the mirror, and I look exactly like you when you read Mitchell's. I want you to be happy—and I think Mitchell could make you really happy if you let him. If you let yourself." He stands and grasps Ice by the nape, too firm to not be painful, too tight to not be loving. "Think about it," Slider says, and leaves, taking his cup with him.

The static bled out of his ears a while ago. No alarms, no hurricane. Just Ice, sitting on a bench in the middle of the mess deck, coffee gone cold and throat gone tight.

“He’s straight,” Ice says, staring up at the water-stained ceiling.

“You asked him that?” Slider replies, curled up in his cot. Ice huffs out a breath and listens to the creak of old metal.

“C’mon Slider.”

The bed squeaks as Slider rolls over to face him. “No, for real. You think he’s the kind of guy to flip his shit if you asked?”

It’s a serious question. Slider’s asking him because Ice knows Maverick better than he does. He knows what he’s supposed to say, what would get him off scot-free, no questions asked: yeah, he is. Yeah, he would. Most guys would. But it feels wrong to say that about Maverick, feels mean and unfair and settles heavy on his tongue when he tries out the words, so he tells the truth instead.

“No. No he wouldn’t.”

“There you have it.” Slider pulls the thin blanket up and over his head, because he’s the weirdest man alive and likes suffocating in his sleep. “We’re two weeks from dwell time. Then you’ll have all the time in the world to ask him, and tell him how you feel, and get a house together by the sea. Maybe get a dog or two.”

Ice sighs. “Goddamnit, Slider.” But Slider’s already halfway to dreamland, barely twitching under the covers. Fuck his life, genuinely.

The USS Enterprise docks at NAS North Island on a chilly November evening. Blueshirts and yellowshirts swarm the deck until the ship is safely in port, and then they part neatly in half for the thousands of men walking across the flight deck, towards the ramp. Booted footsteps march down the length of the carrier, down the metal gangway, and touchdown on the long stretch of concrete bordering the station and the water. It's the first step Ice has taken on solid land in a long, long time. He almost wobbles from the steadiness of it. Duffel in one hand and cap in the other, both he and Slider trudge through the sea of bodies, trying to politely push their way through all the hugging and kissing and crying. Slider's family is meeting him here, along with Jenny, whom he's excited to see again. She and Ice have this thing going where they try to tick Slider off in as little time as possible—so far, their best time is one minute and seven seconds. They're trying to shave it down to under a minute. It'll be good to see her again.

A head of red hair pops up in the swell of people in front of them, and Slider grins. He nudges Ice and Ice nods, mouthing 'go' at him. Was always easy to spot her in a crowd. Slider bustles off and lets the horde swallow him.

His parents are supposed to meet him here, and Tori said she'd try to make it. She has a couple night classes, though, so Ice isn't holding her to it.

"Tom!" A shriek, shoes pounding on concrete, and suddenly he has an armful of Tori Kazansky, clinging to him like a monkey.

"Tori! Shit, you gain a lot of weight while I've been gone?"

"Fuck you, asshole," Tori says, choked up and teary. Ice spins her around a little, and she kicks him. "Stop. Put me down."

He scowls at her. "You're the one that tackled me." He drops her and gives her one last hug, breathing her in. "It's good to see you," he says.

“Can’t say the same about you,” Tori shoots back, muffled into his chest. She’s clutching onto him just as hard, though. “Okay, enough of that. Mom and Dad are waiting.” She punches him in the rib and takes his hand, leading him through the crowd. He has no idea how the hell she knows where she’s going.

They squeeze their way through the throng of people, and Ice lets it all wash over him. Everything: the solid ground under his feet and the sounds of families crying, shrieking, meeting all over again; the glint of moonlight on water and the steady crash of waves breaking on the shore. It’s a gorgeous night, and a gorgeous night for reuniting.

“Mom! Dad!” And Tori starts running now, tugging him along with her. He tries to nod a polite apology to every person he bumps into. “Hurry the fuck up, will you?” she says, gripping his hand with a vengeance.

“Sorry I’m not five-foot-nothing and tiny,” he grumbles, trying to keep up. Tori starts frantically waving with her free hand. “Over here!” she says, voice carried by the night breeze. They finally reach the end of the swarming crowd, and he spots two familiar heads of gray hair. He can’t stop the smile crawling up his throat.

They step out of the crowd and run over to their parents. Harold and Beth Kazansky spot them and start walking too, albeit at a more reasonable pace. They meet in the middle, and Ice throws his arms around his parents, something settling in his chest. “Hey Mom. Dad.” He’s a full foot taller than the both of them, and he presses a kiss to the top of his mother’s head. His dad reaches up to clasp his neck, and the three of them stand there for a moment, just breathing. Just for a minute. Then, they step back, taking each other in for the first time. His dad takes his face in his hands and looks at him, eyes charting the planes of his face. Frowning, he opens his mouth and says:

“Have you been eating well?”

And Ice feels joy, pure, unadulterated joy bubble inside of him. He laughs, loud and long. “Yes, Dad, I’ve been eating.”

His mom eyes him suspiciously, looking like she doesn’t believe him at all. “You sure?” she asks, and he’s home for the first time in half a year. He’s missed his family so much it’s gnawed at him. It’s a gorgeous night, and a gorgeous night for reuniting.

“I’m sure,” Ice says, and that’s when his eyes catch on Tori, who moved a little ways in front of them, and more specifically—his eyes catch on the man she’s next to, who’s staring directly at him.

He opens his mouth but no sound comes out. Slinging an arm over his shoulder, his dad leans up and follows his gaze. “Oh, it was so nice of your friend to come along with us,” he says, smiling. “Nice young man. He’s the one you told us about, right?”

Still, no sound is coming out of Ice’s mouth, because he is currently looking at Maverick Mitchell, in his flight jacket and a pair of beat-up Chucks, staring right back at him. Ice doesn’t know how long they stand there, looking at each other. Enough for both his parents and his sister to shoot them odd glances, heads swiveling back and forth to watch the two of them watch each other. Maverick is the one to break off the staring contest; he smiles and gives Ice a little wave.

It’s a gorgeous night, and a gorgeous night for reuniting.

Chapter End Notes

god bless all the slider types living on planet earth rn.....where would we be without them

thx for reading <3

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

in which food is a love language, the closet is made of glass, and streetlamps are mentioned an ungodly number of times

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Ice finally regains the ability of higher-level cognitive function, he sticks one leg out at a time in a poor man's imitation of walking, one foot in front of the other. With every step that brings him closer to Maverick, his brain frantically tries to come up with conversation openers. *Hey, how are you?* That's a normal person thing to say. Or maybe: *hey, long time no see, how's the gig at TOPGUN going—also, I am harboring romantic feelings for you on a scale that I have never experienced before in my life. By the way. In case that was relevant information.*

“What are you doing here?” is what he says instead, the very second he and Maverick are within speaking distance.

Jesus fucking Christ, Ice.

The little Slider in his head is as appalled as he is. He deserves the mental bitchslapping he's getting right now.

“Good to see you too, buddy.” Maverick pulls him in for a hug and grins up at him after they break apart, in a mirror image of that day he left the Enterprise for Miramar. “Viper mentioned the ship docking for dwell time. Thought I'd drop in for the warm welcome home.”

“And my parents...?”

“Remember that picture they ran in the paper? The Union-Tribune? Apparently they recognized me, so they asked if I was here for you. And here we are.” Maverick rocks back and forth on his heels, sticking his hands in his pockets. Moonlight puddles in the folds of his jacket, catching on the edges of his cheekbones, the tip of his nose.

“Are you?” Ice asks, brain lagging several seconds behind his mouth. Good god, what the fuck is happening to him.

Maverick frowns at him, head tilted to the side. “Am I what?”

Christ. Can’t back out now. Ice is many things, but a quitter he is not. “Here for me.” He tries to spin it into an arrogant, smarmy retort.

“God, no.” Maverick snorts. “I’m here for Slider. You’re just getting in the way.”

Instinctively, Ice scowls. “Fuck you, Mitchell.” Good to know they revert to their usual selves even after six months of distance.

His family chooses this very moment to descend upon them like overtly suspicious vultures, eyes flicking from him to Maverick. Tori, in particular, looks like she smells blood in the water. Today, however, it seems that she’s feeling unusually merciful, as she hooks one arm through Ice’s and the other through their mom’s. “Can we *please* get dinner already—I’m starving, it’s getting colder by the minute, and I would really like a burger right about now.”

Thank god for Tori, and for all little sisters across the globe.

His dad turns towards Maverick. “You should eat with us,” he says.

Shit. So close. Of course his dad would never pass up the chance to feed someone.

Raising a hand to preemptively cut off Maverick's attempts at politeness, he continues. "You've come all this way, son. Get dinner with us. It'll be good to get to know another friend of Tom's." It's a gentle request, but Ice's dad has the kind of eyes you don't say no to.

Inevitably, Maverick relents.

It's going to be a long, long night.

Due to an unforeseen sequence of terrible events, Ice is currently living out his worst nightmare in real-time, and he's helpless to stop it. Not a nosediving plane or getting shot down in the line of duty—no, this is much worse.

It is 2237 on a Friday night and Ice is trapped in a diner booth, wedged between Maverick to his right and Tori to his left. In the booth directly across from them are his parents, identical smiles creasing the corners of their eyes. Slider and his family are about to arrive any minute now—they're all supposed to have dinner together to celebrate the first day of dwell time. Ice isn't in any sort of celebrating mood, though. He mostly just feels sick.

The pretty waitress—Breonna, says her bright yellow nametag—stops by their table to take their orders and collect the menus. Ice considers asking her to leave one behind so he can bash himself on the head with it.

"So, Pete, what do you do at TOPGUN?" Tori asks after Breonna leaves with a refill and a smile, leaning over Ice to look Maverick in the eye. She's kept up a steady poking at Ice's thigh since the moment they found their seats, a sharp *jab-jab-jab* under the table.

Ice is hoping for an earthquake. California gets a lot of those.

"Oh, I'm an instructor. It's mostly paperwork, but I get to hop in a plane every once in a while." Mav's leaning over Ice, too, and now Ice is starting to feel like an over-large, cumbersome indoor plant. Music is playing from some distant corner near the back where the

jukebox is, so Ice focuses on Marvin Gaye singing something about war not being the answer instead of Tori prodding a hole into his leg. Because Tori knows. Because Tori took one look at Ice looking at Maverick, and understood. And is now currently making sure Ice knows that she knows, because the duty of a little sister is to terrorize her older brother, even if she's over a decade past little now. Ice takes back his previous sentiment; regrets it, even. Fuck little sisters.

"Teaching, huh?" Ice's dad says, prompting Maverick to continue. Both his parents are high school teachers, and so they lean in too, just a little.

Nevermind the indoor plant. He's the equivalent of an uninteresting wall fixture.

"Yeah, uh— techniques, strategies, a little bit of theory," Mav says, shifting in his seat. "I'm liking it more than I thought I would, honestly." His thigh brushes up against Ice's and Ice is suddenly, inexplicably aware of every single nerve ending in his body, aware of the scratchy uniform fabric on his skin and the almost-unnatural furnace heat radiating off of Maverick, warming him from thigh to shoulder.

"That's because you get to teach young, impressionable minds all your favorite suicidal tricks," Ice murmurs into his glass.

"I take offense to a lot of what you just said, but especially the young part." He flicks a balled-up straw wrapper at Ice. "I'm barely older than my students, Kazansky. Hell, some are older than *me*."

"And yet you're still corrupting them. You've got a real talent, Mitchell."

Maverick just glares at him and turns back to face his parents, who are talking about employing teaching strategies in a military setting, or something. Ice stops paying attention. Maverick's entire thigh is now pressing up against his, and he's bouncing his leg a little; Ice has never seen him so fidgety.

Paying no heed to the chatter, Ice idly listens to someone switch Marvin Gaye out for Bob Marley, and Maverick is still shifting next to him. Restless. He's scuffling his feet under the

table, shoes sliding noiselessly against greasy linoleum flooring; fingers twisting in knots, hidden from view in his lap.

The little bell over the door rings, and Slider and company walk in, waving at them before settling down at the round table adjacent to their booth. Breonna hustles over to hand out menus as both families make pleasantries, and out of the corner of his eye, Ice sees Slider attempt to make eye contact with him. Aggressively. Ice pretends not to notice as he stands up to shake hands with Mr. Kerner and kiss Mrs. Kerner's cheek.

"Hey, Jen, long time no see," Ice says, kissing her on the cheek too. Her hair is firetruck-red under the diner's fluorescent lights.

"Feels like no time at all from my end. You're all Ron ever talks about in his letters." Jenny's smile is just this side of devious.

Finally, Ice turns to look at Slider. "Is that so?" he asks, calmly. Pleasantly. Slider picks up his menu and looks at it like it's the most interesting thing in the world.

"Mhmm. Apparently there's a potential romance brewing," she says, voice hushed and teasing. "He didn't say that, at least not in so many words, but I can read between the lines. Let me just say, Ice,"—Jenny leans in close—"you sure know how to pick 'em." Her eyes dart to Maverick for the briefest moment, who is currently trying to charm the pants off of Mrs. Kerner. It looks like it's working.

Goddamn it, Slider. Ice closes his eyes, pinches the bridge of his nose. *Remember, Ice. You cannot enact bodily harm on Ron Kerner. It would take too damn long for them to find you a replacement RIO.*

"Slider's taken one too many knocks to the head, Jenny. I wouldn't believe a word that meathead says." He squeezes her shoulder and glares at Slider the whole five steps back to his seat. Slider pretends not to notice, contemplating the three different kinds of sandwiches they have on the menu. Tuning back into the conversation still taking place at their table, that has since turned into a lively debate about West Coast living vs. East Coast living, Ice slides into the booth after Tori scoots out of it to make way.

“What was that all about?” Maverick whispers as his parents start to bicker about the advantages of snow. *“Slider’s been staring at the same spot on that menu for the past two minutes.”* His face morphs in an instant, from mildly amused to increasingly concerned. *“Oh, shit. Can he read?”*

The urge to stick a fork in his eye has never been so overwhelming until now. *“Yes, of course Slider can fucking read,”* Ice whispers furiously. *“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”*

Ignoring his incoming headache, he instead focuses on the specifics of the argument overtaking their table: Maverick and his mom, firmly repping the East, both transplants from the meaner coast. His dad and sister, staunch West Coast advocates, born and bred right here in sunny California.

Tori elbows him in the side. “I’m assuming you’re on the right side of history here?”

“I honestly have no opinion whatsoever. Is there even a difference besides weather?” Ice says, shrugging.

The table is scandalized. Even Slider’s dad glances over to look at him, a brief pause in the recitation of his order to Breonna.

“What?” Ice says. “Am I the only one who doesn’t have a strong opinion on this?”

Maverick snorts. “A first for you.”

“Mitchell, I can say with absolute certainty that you’ve never encountered anything in your life that you didn’t have an opinion on.”

“I don’t really have a preference, either,” Slider pipes up from behind his menu. “I think six months on a boat does that to you. As long as it’s solid ground, I’m happy as a clam.”

And who can argue with that logic?

Dinner is hot and greasy and delicious. Ice has a lot of respect for all the guys back at the ship that worked the kitchens, but *fuck*. He's missed heart attack-inducing diner food like he's missed floors under his feet that didn't sway.

"Oh my god," Tori groans, mouth full of burger.

Ice doesn't even have it in him to tell her to close her mouth while chewing; he's right there with her. He's an inch away from moaning—half-tempted to barge into the kitchen and find out whether or not they're using cocaine as a garnish. Has food always tasted like this?

Maverick seems to agree, shoveling chicken and waffles into his mouth like it's his last meal, and he doesn't even have an excuse. He's been landlocked for close to a year now.

"You wanna slow down there a bit, Mitchell? Who's been feeding you?" Ice snarks after swallowing down a handful of fries.

Maverick gives him the finger underneath the table, out of view from his sweet, sweet, unassuming parents. "Can't a man appreciate good food when he finds it?" There's a dab of something creamy on his cheek, right by his mouth.

"You got something on your—" Ice gestures with a hand at the corner of Maverick's mouth, smeared with whipped butter. "No, it's on the other— you're not getting it. It's on the—" and Ice wipes at it with his remaining non-grease-stained thumb. It catches on Maverick's lip for the barest second, and Ice pulls away at a regular speed—not too fast and not too slow—because he is a regular human being who does regular things. "You eat like a child."

Unbothered, Maverick chews at him, open-mouthed.

Neither of them notice Tori, who has stopped attacking her burger to stare at them, cheeks puffed with half-eaten food. Nor do they notice Slider from the next table over, looking like he's currently experiencing extreme damage to his psyche; nor Ice's parents, who are right in front of them, identical looks on their faces: eyebrows raised, club sandwiches raised halfway to their mouths.

Ice and Maverick are kicking each other under the table like five year olds, and they do not notice anything or anyone around them at all. The ground beneath their feet could split, the linoleum could crack and splinter and give way to dirt, and they would still be sitting in that shitty little booth, in that shitty little diner, kicking each other's shins.

"You sure we can't drive you home?" Ice asks, one hand splayed on the roof of the family Ford Fiesta, the other twirling the keys in a slow, steady circle. It's getting late—Slider and Family left a little while before, with hugs and kisses and thinly-veiled threats. (The last one from Slider and Slider alone, who pulled Ice aside to say things about *honesty* and *happiness* and *having faith that good things will happen, you little shit*—you know. The usual.)

"Nah." Maverick's smile is soft and worn under the sodium streetlight. Dimmer than usual, from the late hour and the frankly hysterical amount of food he managed to put down not even half an hour earlier. "I took my bike here, so..."

Ice shrugs. "I can drive you to pick it up tomorrow morning." His family's house is a stone's throw from Miramar, La Jolla not even twenty minutes away.

Maverick shakes his head. "No, it's alright. I think I need the drive, anyway. Cold wind'll be good for my grease-clogged pores and whatnot." He shoves his hands in his pockets, and he's still smiling up at him. Does this guy ever stop smiling? How does his face not get tired? Ice is sure he hasn't smiled as much in a month as Maverick has in a single day.

The streetlamp casts dramatic shadows on his face, eyelashes long and dark and fluttering. The leather of his jacket is night-sky-black under the artificial light.

Ice clears his throat. “Well, you should get going. It’s almost midnight.” He clasps Maverick’s shoulder. “I’ll see you soon, yeah?”

“Course you will,” Maverick says, smile more of a smirk now. “Not getting rid of me that easily, Kazansky.” And with one last punch to Ice’s arm, he starts walking towards the little side street where he parked his bike, pulling his jacket tighter around him.

“Drive safe,” Ice calls out after him. The northbound motorway is almost pitch-black this time of night. The high-mast lights over there are few and far-between, and a shit ton of semis use that highway to get from San Diego to Los Angeles.

“You too!” Maverick looks back to holler at him, still smiling. With one last two-fingered salute, he disappears into the inky blackness, where the streetlamps can’t reach him. Ice waits for the sound of a motorcycle revving before getting in the driver’s seat, shutting the door on the cold.

His parents are asleep in the backseat, snoring gently on each other’s shoulders. It hasn’t even been five minutes since they got in. He starts the car and Tori looks at him, gaze heavy and calculating. Ice pulls away from the curb and starts the twenty-minute drive back home, completely content to sit and marinate in the quiet. If she wants him to be the one to break the silence, she’s shit out of luck.

“So. Maverick, huh?” Her voice is a low murmur, pitched slightly above the hum of the car.

He considers the endless stretch of road unfurling in front of him. He could lie, except:

- 1) Tori would see through his bullshit in 0.2 seconds flat,
- 2) Tori would needle him for the rest of his life after calling foul, and,
- 3) Tori is his little sister, A.K.A. the person who knows every single terrible thing he’s done and has never told a single living soul about any of them; has, in fact, aided him in doing

some of those terrible things herself. Who was the first and only person he has ever come out to (because Slider spotting him with someone's hand down his pants next to a dumpster doesn't count, and Jenny doesn't count either, because she's always just known shit about everyone). Who has seen him pimply and gangly-limbed and doing push-ups in their tiny backyard because he wanted so badly to go to Annapolis; has seen him shout at their parents, has sat through all the times he'd yelled at her; has watched him walk out the house and slam their screen door shut once, twice, three times before he learned to leash it all inside of himself. Seen him at his nastiest and angriest and most lost, and still shows up to poke him in the thigh; who jumps into his arms at the first sight of him.

Ice stares at the empty highway in front of him, hands on 10 and 2. He thinks about lying.

"Yeah," he says, instead. Quiet. Like he's afraid saying it too loud will make it real. Tall streetlights burn orange, blurring into streaks past their windows.

Tori grins. After a beat of silence: "He's cute."

The muscle under Ice's right eye twitches. He stays silent.

"C'mon." Tori nudges him with an elbow. "C'mon. He's cute. You can admit that one thing but you can't admit this?"

Gritting his teeth, Ice thinks very carefully about his next words. "He's..." he trails off. "Some would say that...Mitchell is not. Unpleasant. To look at."

Seemingly achieving the impossible, Tori's smile grows even wider, and even more smug. Ice thinks about crashing the car into the nearest electrical pole. He'd have to kick his parents out the backseat, first. They're not involved in this. Except for some miraculous reason, Tori decides to be merciful for the second time tonight (a record!), and doesn't say anything else about it. From the corner of his eye, Ice can see her slide lower into her seat and close her eyes, no doubt gearing up for a nap. Ever since med school, she's started sleeping everywhere she could, whenever she gets the chance.

Settling in for a tranquil drive home, Ice leans back in his seat. Tori breaks the peaceful silence not one minute later though, eyes still closed, and says:

“He’s good for you, Tom. He makes you laugh.”

She falls asleep not long after that.

The moon chases them the whole ride home. Ice wonders how fast he’d have to drive to outrun it.

Chapter End Notes

ice & mav flirting right in front of ices parents....MY BROTHERS GET A GRIP!!!! u 2 need professional help.....

this chapter was honestly more ab ice & his sister instead of him and mav but look ok. i need to push my ice has a little sister agenda somehow

thx for reading as always hope u enjoyed!!

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

in which parallel parking is a bitch, love is stored in tiny singaporean eateries, and poor ice gets two different kinds of heartburn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Alexander and Yelena Kazansky came to the United States in the early 1920s, they were told one thing: all roads lead to New York. Pick one, follow it, and settle down. Be good Russians—work hard, don't make a fuss, and claw your way into the American Dream. They followed every instruction to the letter, except for one. You see, the Kazanskys were sick of the cold; growing up in Moscow did that to you. So when the ship they hitched a ride on docked at Ellis Island, they brought what little they had with them and traveled west; so far west, in fact, that they ran out of country before they could keep going. This is how the Kazanskys ended up in sunny, sunny California. They went as far south as they could and settled down in San Diego, instead of the more logical Los Angeles or San Francisco, where all the other Russians were. But they were happy. They assimilated, as all starry-eyed immigrants do, and Alexander became Alex, and Yelena became Ellen. They had a beautiful baby boy and named him Harold. Thus, roots were put down in the southwesternmost major city of the USA, all because the Kazanskys took inspiration from migratory birds and looked for warmth.

Ice hates them for it, a little. Not the *escaping from extreme poverty and travelling across the world in search of better prospects* part, but the *San Diego* part, for sure. Of all the cities in California, and they chose the one where you're regularly woken up by seagulls at the asscrack of dawn.

Regularly.

The first sleep Ice has back on land is cut abruptly short by a seagull perched on the windowsill at five-oh-one in the morning. Now, Ice is a military man. He's used to early wake-ups, and he's used to abrupt wake-ups; he can't even remember the last time he's gotten up later than 0700. But *just* this once, he wanted to rise later than the sun did. His first night in a real bed, and his first morning waking up slow and easy.

The seagull's still squawking by his window, hopping back and forth across the ledge.

Sighing his first long-suffering sigh of the day, Ice walks to the window, glares at the offending culprit, and bangs his fist against the frame. Hard. The glass pane shudders from the force of it, and the devil bird spooks; flaps its wings once, twice, and takes off.

Damn. That's one thing he didn't miss about home.

The kitchen has always been his favorite part of the house. It's big, bigger than the living room and dining area combined, and sunnier too, thanks to the wide window over the sink. It's where they eat all their meals when there's no guests over. Some of Ice's favorite memories were made right here: him and his mom and dad, folding and crimping dough at seven in the morning to make pierogies (Tori never had the patience for it); the four of them, huddled over the kitchen island and eating out of white takeout boxes, saying 'screw it' to cooking dinner for the night and ordering in from Huang's instead. He's been deployed more times than he can count on a hand, and he still misses home like a lost limb every single time.

He putters around the kitchen for a bit; starts a pot of coffee and makes himself some toast. Ice has six months of flight instruction duties to fulfill before his next deployment; then, he'll be put on a three-year sea-shore rotation for the foreseeable future. His family was not pleased about it when he told them last night. Actually, that's an understatement: his family was seething mad about it when he told them last night—groggy from the car nap and the greasy food, they still managed to give him an earful and a half. *I'll get leave every now and then*, he said, as soothingly as possible. *It's not like I'll be away three years straight. I'll be here for a month or so every once in a while.*

Shut up, they said in unison. *Give us time to process, will you?*

Well, Ice hopes they've processed by now. Whatever the hell that means. It's gonna be a damn struggle to get on that carrier in six months time if his parents make due on their promise and chain him to his room.

Socked feet on floorboards tear him away thoughts about chains and rooms.

“Morning,” Tori says, padding down the stairs and shuffling into the kitchen.

Ice raises an eyebrow at her from his perch on a wobbly bar stool. “Morning. You’re up unusually early.”

“Got a test this morning I haven’t studied for.” And in one fluid motion, Tori pours herself a cup of coffee and downs half of it.

Good god. “That was boiling a couple minutes ago.”

She flaps a hand at him dismissively and tops off her mug.

“You need a ride to school later? It’s on my way to Miramar.”

“What’re you going to Miramar for?” she asks, flopping down on the stool across from him.

“Need to sort out some stuff for TOPGUN,” Ice says. “Paperwork, housing arrangements, probably some other stuff.”

There’s a look in her eye that Ice doesn’t like. He thinks he knows where this is going.

Tori’s quiet for a bit, sipping her coffee at a more appropriate speed. Then, she asks, “Is Maverick gonna be there?” all casual-like.

In comes his second long-suffering sigh of the day. It’s not even six in the morning.

“Yes, Tori, he will be. Seeing as, you know, he lives there and all.”

She hums around her mug like she’s storing that tidbit of information away for future use. Fuck, she probably is. “Don’t you have a test to study for?” Ice cuts in before she can say anything else.

Tori jumps down from her stool, harried. “Yes I do! And yes I need a ride, thanks Tom.” Flicking the back of his neck, she picks up her mug and bounds up the stairs in a flurry.

Great, Ice thinks, draining the last of his mug. *This is great*.

“Stop.” Ice slaps Tori’s hand away.

“Hey!”

“Stop fiddling with the radio.”

“Maybe if you listened to better music, I’d—”

“If *I* listened to better music? And who exactly do you—”

TOPGUN is exactly how Ice left it. The halls are the same kind of dim, the air is the same kind of dusty, and that one corner in the locker room is the same kind of dripping.

He listens to the secretary give a run down of his schedule for the next week, signs in all the blank spaces she points to, and pockets the keys to his assigned house. In the instructor's village, now, with its elusive full baths and sizable backyards. Maverick talked about his new place for months when he first moved in. Said the water pressure was fit for a king.

Speaking of, Ice was wrong, actually. TOPGUN isn't exactly how Ice left it. There's one little thing that's changed since then, and it comes in the form of an office that was previously unoccupied. Now, though, Ice can make out a silhouette behind the frosted door window, hunched over and sitting.

He knocks, two sharp raps on the door.

"Come in!" someone calls out from inside.

Ice walks into the room and raises an eyebrow at Maverick, slouched over his desk, forehead in one hand and pen in the other. "It's a weekend, you know."

Maverick looks up and doesn't seem at all surprised to see him. "When you said 'see you soon,' I wasn't expecting it to be *this* soon."

Ice snorts. "Don't flatter yourself, Mitchell." He takes the keys from his pocket and jangles them around. "Housing assignment. Guess who's back at TOPGUN for the next couple of months?"

"Shit. You're the new hire?"

"Why? Disappointed?" Ice says, goading. There's a little niggling part of his brain that doesn't mean it as a joke.

"Oh, definitely. I was hoping for Slider." Maverick's put away the file he'd been reading and is now smiling up at him, elbows propped up on the desk.

“Is that so?” he says. “Well, you’re in luck. Slider’s coming back too. We had to pick a station for when we’re on shore and Viper said they’d always take us in, so.”

“Aw, did you guys miss me that much?”

Ice stares at him, unmoved. “Sure, Maverick. It’s not because we both live in California, not even thirty minutes away from here.”

Maverick doesn’t even blink. “It’s okay—I know you missed me, you don’t have to say it out loud.” Sun filters in through the slats of the blinds, bright lines of light cutting patterns into his skin.

There’s something building in Ice’s throat. *A yes, maybe. Yes, I did miss you. I’ve missed you for six months; we were only in TOPGUN together for two. I’ve missed you longer than I’ve known you.*

What he says instead is: “Lunch?”

Maverick grins. “You know exactly the way to a man’s heart, Ice.” He throws his pen inside a drawer that does not look like it follows an organizational system in the slightest. Ice is sure he spots a half-eaten granola bar in there. Maverick grabs his jacket from the back of his chair and says, “It’s on you, by the way.”

So. Lunch.

“This was a mistake,” Ice mutters to himself, trying to squeeze into a spot by the curb. Some douchebag parked his Buick too close to the car one over behind him, so now Ice is left to attempt the trickiest parallel parking job in the history of curbsides. It doesn’t help that

Maverick decided he wanted to be “helpful” and hopped out the passenger’s, knocking on the trunk of Ice’s Cutlass and yelling unhelpful directions like a particularly shitty valet.

“A little bit to the left!” Maverick yells, *knock-knock-knock* on the trunk.

Ice backs up, a little bit to the left just as Maverick said, and his tire hits the curb immediately.

“Too left! You need to go more right!” *Knock-knock-knock*.

He moves a quarter-inch forward and to the right, and he hits the brakes just as his hood was about to bump Douchebag’s shiny Buick.

“Whoops!” Maverick calls out, seemingly deciding that his commentary is integral to this process. “You almost hit that car over there.”

Ice can feel his eye start to twitch. He rolls the window down and shouts, “Can you shut the fuck up, please?”

A little old lady hobbling down the sidewalk gasps, scandalized. Jesus fucking Christ. “Sorry, ma’am,” he says, grimacing. She picks up the pace and doesn’t stop to look at him, cane a steady tapping on the concrete. He can see Maverick in the side-view mirror, clamping a hand over his mouth, red in the face. Fucking hell. This is too much hassle for some goddamn lunch. He doesn’t even know where they’re eating.

With no more distractions in the form of incessant rambling or devout Christian grandmas, Ice parks as parallel to the curb as Douchebag and his Buick will allow. Stepping out of the car, he sees Maverick in the same position he was in before, doubled-over, mouth clamped shut. He staggers towards Ice, eyes shining. “The—that lady, you—” He gasps out, incomprehensible. “‘*Sorry, ma’am,*’ the look on your face—” Maverick bursts into snorting laughter, right in the middle of the sidewalk. Passersby swerve around him, shooting the both of them odd glances, no doubt five seconds away from calling a mental institution to come collect.

God help him.

Ice maneuvers them both to a little patch of grass by the sidewalk, waiting for Maverick to get the giggles out of his system, because that's what it is. Hands on knees, blotchy red in the cheeks, honest-to-god giggling. *What a little shit*, Ice thinks, watching him. A choking warmth wraps around his ribs, tight like a fist.

"Okay," Maverick gasps out, glassy-eyed and breathless. "I'm okay now. Shit." He drags a palm down his face, pushing Ice in the direction of the restaurant he recommended. "Tom Kazansky, enemy of little old ladies everywhere."

"Fuck off, Mitchell," Ice groans, shoving Maverick off him. "For that, lunch is on you now."

Maverick smiles at him like that was his plan all along, and they stop in front of a narrow door, painted bright yellow. No windows, no sign, in a completely nondescript commercial low-rise. Just some admittedly very pretty orchids by the stoop, blooming white and pink and orange, stately in their clay pots. This is the oddest restaurant Ice has ever seen.

"You want us to eat at a drug den?"

"Shut up." Maverick elbows him in the side without even looking. "Hand to god, the best thing I've discovered this past year. Trust me on this."

And what is there left for Ice to do but comply? He's a soldier: he follows orders.

Maverick knocks on the door, a chipper shave and a haircut. What kind of restaurant requires you to knock first? Is this some kind of secret club? What shit did Maverick get himself into now? Cold uneasiness trickles down Ice's spine, but before he can voice any of his (incredibly warranted) questions out loud, the door swings open to reveal—

A little old lady.

He blinks. She's half his size (literally), jet-black hair in a neat bob, crow's feet lining her eyes. Ice is about to turn to Maverick and suggest that, *perhaps*, they've knocked on the wrong door, until the woman grins, bright and wide. "Peter!" she exclaims, accent softening the vowels, "Peter" more of a "Pete-uh."

"Mrs. Tan," Maverick says, smiling just as cheerily. He bends down, because she's so small even he has to crouch a little, and lets her pat his cheek approvingly. "It's been a little while."

"It's been two weeks," the woman says, ushering them both in, "and I told you to call me Christine."

Maverick's grin turns wicked. "What can I say, Mrs. Tan, I was raised a good boy." He winks at her.

Ice doesn't let anything show on his face, but he very much so doubts that. *No fucking way you were, Mitchell*. But really, he's just relieved that Maverick didn't lead them onto the set of a horror movie. They're not in the wrong place, because: a) Maverick and Mrs. Tan know each other, and b) they're crammed single-file in a short hallway that leads into what looks like the tiniest restaurant this side of San Diego.

Maverick pushes Ice in front of him and gets on his tiptoes to look at Mrs. Tan over his shoulder, saying, "This is I—Tom. Thomas Kazansky. He asked me to take him to the best restaurant in town, so here we are."

Ice sticks a hand out and smiles the politest smile he has in his arsenal. "It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Tan."

"Flatterer," she says to Maverick, good-naturedly. To Ice, she says, "And it's good to finally meet you, Thomas. Don't be like your rascal of a friend, please. Call me Christine." She takes his hand in both of hers and gives it a squeeze instead of a shake, and then says, "Come sit down. We're blocking the way."

(Wait. *Finally*? What is that supposed to mean?)

They shimmy into the restaurant, Ice ducking just in time to avoid the light fixture hanging from the precariously low ceiling. The space is small, with nine or so plastic tables scattered around the place. Gleaming double-action doors dominate the back wall, presumably leading into the kitchen, what with the muffled sounds of angry yelling coming from them. One exit, no fire alarms in sight. This place is a fire safety nightmare.

Mrs. Tan steers them towards the only empty table left. “Does your friend need a menu?” she asks, looking at Maverick.

Maverick raises his eyebrows at Ice.

Oh, what the hell—Maverick can order for him. He doesn’t even know what kind of food they’re about to eat. Mitchell just said ‘you’ll see’ when Ice asked in the car. “No, it’s alright. Mav— Pete can order.”

Maverick smiles like that’s exactly what he wanted Ice to say and leans in close towards Mrs. Tan, says something Ice can’t quite catch. Mrs. Tan smiles, tells them she’ll be back with their food soon, and disappears into the kitchen.

That familiar foreboding frigidness settles at the base of Ice’s spine. There’s a look in Maverick’s eye he doesn’t like.

“You ever tried laksa?”

“Oh my fucking god,” Ice says around a mouthful of noodles.

Maverick cackles. “It’s good, right?”

He hums in agreement, still trying to swallow down the spoonful in his mouth. Oh, it’s definitely good. Laksa’s fucking delicious: tofu and prawn and vegetables swimming in a rich, tangy broth; sweet and salty and sour, and *spicy*. Really goddamn spicy.

“So, how do you know Mrs. Tan anyway?” he asks, pushing through the heat building at the roof of his mouth. “This is quite possibly the smallest restaurant in California.”

“Ah.” Maverick sucks on the head of a prawn, taking his sweet time answering. “It’s kind of a long story.”

Ice looks at him questioningly. Still, Maverick doesn’t budge, avoiding his eyes. He nibbles on a slice of hard-boiled egg.

Huh. Ice doesn’t push; even God wouldn’t be able to get Maverick to do something he doesn’t want to do. Ice slurps down his soup instead.

“Is it—” Ice breaks off with a cough. “Is it supposed to be this spicy?” His tongue feels like it wants to physically detach itself from the rest of his body. He eyes the chili slices floating around in the broth.

“Well...” Maverick has that look on his face again. The one Ice doesn’t like. “So, this place has three different levels of spice, right? Mild, medium, hot. I always get hot when I’m here, so.” He shrugs, smiling at Ice like he’s never done a single wrong thing in his life.

This motherfucker. “You motherfucker.” The burn is starting to crawl down his throat now, and Ice sips at his water in a plea for mercy.

“What, Ice?” Maverick slurps his soup in the most irritating way imaginable. “Can’t handle the heat?” He’s shed his jacket, at least, but he’s not even sweating. What a fucking asshole.

Ice's jaw ticks. "I can handle spice just fine, Mitchell," he says, in clear contradiction to what he's sure he looks like right now. He's sweating like a pig, his face feels like it got smashed into a bed of hot coals, and his hair is starting to go limp from all the dampness. He probably looks like he ran a marathon right about now.

Again, that smile; like Ice has walked into a trap Maverick set up just for him. "If you're so sure, why don't we have ourselves a little wager," he says, head tilted, running a finger over the rim of his glass in slow circles. Casual. Languid. Like he doesn't care all that much. But Maverick's got the kind of eyes you see through, and right now they're dark and heavy and electric; like he's daring Ice to back down.

Ice has never backed down from anything in his life. He raises an eyebrow, prompting Maverick to continue.

"If you win, I tell you how I know Mrs. Tan. If I win..." he trails off, eyes narrowing in thought. "If I win, you have to cook for me. One time only, anytime I want." Maverick dangles the prize in front of him like a carrot on a stick.

Ice will not be fooled. "What's the bet?"

"Who can finish their bowl faster." Maverick's teeth look sharper than usual.

Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding. "Fuck you," Ice snipes at him, glaring down at his laksa.

"What, Ice?" he looks up to find Maverick looking up at him through his eyelashes, for all the world the most innocent man alive. Ice knows the truth, and the truth is Maverick is a conniving, sneaky son of a bitch. "Thought you said you could take the heat?"

"Fuck you," Ice repeats, not really feeling at his wittiest right now. "You're already two-thirds finished anyway!" And it's true: they've both polished off their noodles, all the seafood and veggies, but Ice's broth is almost untouched, and Maverick's almost done with his.

“No, no, you’re right.” And with that, Maverick takes Ice’s bowl, pours soup into his own until they’re mostly level with each other. He smiles up at him and pushes Ice’s bowl back to his side of the table. “Now we’re even.”

Fuck. Now he has to do it. He sighs. (His third long-suffering sigh of the day, but who’s counting.) “You’re on, Mitchell.” No way he’s going to lose a goddamn *soup drinking contest* to Maverick Mitchell. They grip their respective bowls like how he imagines NASCAR drivers grip steering wheels, and on the count of three, they slurp.

Good god.

This is the hardest thing Ice has ever done in his entire goddamn life. Fuck ROTC, fuck Basic, fuck flight school, and fuck TOPGUN. Pouring spicy soup down his throat is single handedly the worst shit Ice has ever endured. Like lava trickling down his esophagus and seeping into his lungs, so far past spicy it’s not even funny anymore. This can’t be good for your health. Why do people do this to themselves? Of course Mitchell has to choose the hottest spice level available; everything always has to be a goddamn challenge for him. Every single thing an opportunity to prove himself: a game to win, a hurdle to jump, a limit to push. Soup to guzzle down. And when he got sick of the ground, he looked up and decided to conquer the sky too. Shit. Ice is almost done. Is Maverick done yet?

“Finished,” Ice gasps out, setting the bowl down with a hack and a cough.

He looks to see Maverick leaning back in his chair, sitting pretty and smug. He’s flushed from cheek to cheek, pink running across the bridge of his nose, and he’s starting to sweat, finally—getting damp around the collarbones, the temples. His lips are so red they look swollen, and Ice forgets for a split second that they were even competing in the first place.

“What the fuck?” he says, when he comes back to himself. “When did you finish?”

“A while ago,” Maverick says, grinning like he’s won the lotto and not a literal soup-drinking (eating?) competition. “You took your sweet time.”

Ice scowls at him. “No, I did not. You’re just a masochistic lunatic.”

“Woah, Ice.” Maverick raises his eyebrows in mock affront, putting a hand to his chest. “I told that to you in confidence.”

“Not like that,” Ice hisses. Christ. “You’re an asshole, you know that?”

“An asshole you owe a homecooked meal. You’ve got some soup around your mouth.” Maverick smiles sunnily, and before Ice can respond to that with a sharp, clever, incredibly witty retort, Maverick takes a tissue from the napkin dispenser and wipes at the corner of Ice’s mouth. The words die on his (still burning) tongue.

He needs to say something. He needs to say something before the silence stretches on for too long and things get weird. His chest is burning, and it has nothing to do with the goddamn laksa.

Ice opens his mouth, trying to fit syllables together. He ends up with: “They have drinks here?”

Grinning, Maverick raises his hand to call over Mrs. Tan. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Ice was skeptical when Maverick ordered whatever the fuck a “Milo dinosaur” was, but Mrs. Tan comes back with two tall glasses of chocolate drink, a heaping pile of chocolate powder topped on each one, and Ice resolves to never question Maverick’s restaurant orders ever again.

“Holy shit,” Ice groans, foregoing the straw and sipping at his drink straight from the glass instead. It’s sweeter than he would have preferred, but it’s such a welcome relief from the burning hell that was the laksa, so Ice cradles the glass in his hands like it’s a chalice. It’s so cold he gets a headache from drinking it too fast, throbbing at his temples, and that’s a relief too.

Laughing, Maverick almost chokes on his mouthful of chocolate powder. “You’ve got a—” He gestures to Ice’s upper lip. “You’ve got a little—”

Ice swipes at it with his tongue. “Did I get it?”

Maverick just laughs harder, eyes sparkling under the shitty LED bulbs.

Ice’s heart leaps up, into his throat, and he admits to himself in the privacy of his own head that he could get used to this. Table so small their knees are knocking together, restaurant so dim Maverick’s laugh is the brightest thing in the room.

Christ. Get your shit together, Ice. He grabs a napkin and wipes his mouth. “Now did I get it?”

Maverick’s looking at him like— like Ice doesn’t even know what. “Yeah, you got it.”

He’s still smiling, and Ice might be too. Just a little.

Mrs. Tan comes to collect their empty glasses and Maverick shoves a ten in her hand, eyes pleading.

She doesn’t even flinch. “You know I don’t accept payment from you, Peter.” *Damn*, Ice thinks. *They should eat here more often.*

“And you know I’ll never stop trying, Mrs. Tan.”

“That’s all it will ever be.” She drops the bill back on the table. “Trying.” Turning to Ice, she smiles at him and asks, “How was the food?”

“Delicious,” he answers honestly. Good god, that was one hell of a meal. “It was fantastic, Mrs. Tan.”

“Although, Tom did have a little difficulty with the spice level. Mild’s probably best for him next time we come by,” Maverick says, just a tad smug. Ice glares at him.

“Do make that next time soon, will you?” Mrs. Tan flicks Maverick’s ear chidingly. “We miss feeding you.”

Maverick takes his hand in hers and squeezes. “Sorry, Mrs. Tan. Was a little busy these past few weeks, is all. Promise I’ll be back soon. With this oaf.” He gestures to Ice as he says it, and Ice feels a little offended, but he also mostly just feels warm.

Mrs. Tan nods approvingly. “Good,” she says, clasping their shoulders as a parting gift. She takes their glasses and bustles into the kitchen. Maverick folds the discarded ten, pins it down using the napkin dispenser as a paperweight, and says frantically, “Go, go, go, go.”

“What—”

“Before she comes back! Move your ass!” Maverick grabs Ice’s arm and hauls him along, pulls him across the restaurant and into the little hallway, not stopping until they’re back out on the sidewalk.

Ice raises an eyebrow. “You do that all the time?”

“Mhmm,” Maverick hums, walking to the car.

“Why do you have a lifetime eat-free pass at that restaurant?” And again, how the hell did Maverick even stumble across this place? It was fantastic, absolutely. But more than a little sketchy. It didn’t even have a sign up front, Christ.

Maverick whistles a chipper little tune.

“It’s part of the story you refuse to tell me, isn’t it.” They turn the corner and slip through the counterflow of people, the sidewalks busier this time of day.

“Mhmm,” Maverick hums again. Whatever happened to get him a free meal at that place for the foreseeable future, it’s embarrassing enough to shut him up for once in his life. Neat trick.

Ice unlocks his car, and they slide into it, full enough to burst. He swears he can feel the soup inside him, sloshing around. He lets out a sharp breath, tries to shake off that drowsiness really good food makes you feel, and Maverick glances over at him, brow furrowed.

“You want me to drive?”

“No, it’s fine.” Ice frowns. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” Maverick drawls. “Maybe you’re still really fucked up from that soup. Hey, I don’t judge—”

Ice starts the car. “Fuck off, Mitchell.”

“What? I’m trying to be a nice person here. If you need me to drive because your delicate sensibilities were—”

“I will throw you out right now, don’t even try it.” Ice is about to put his foot on the gas until — “Oh Jesus fuck.”

“What? You forget something?”

“No, Maverick, we’re still stuck between these two fucking assholes.” Ice gestures vaguely towards the cars in front and behind them. There’s barely two inches of leeway forwards and backwards: they’re bumper-to-bumper in the worst way imaginable.

“Oh,” Maverick says. And then he laughs. “Well, looks like you’re gonna need my services again.”

God, no. Ice does not. He tells Maverick as much, but he just grins at Ice and steps out of the car. A minute later, an incessant knocking at his trunk.

“Back up a little bit!”

Ice closes his eyes and fights off the impending headache rearing its head. He also fights off the impending smile sneaking its way across his face. He’s mostly successful.

“Ice! You backing up?”

Keyword: *mostly*. He loses one fight by a long shot.

Chapter End Notes

alternatively titled: how many times can ao3 user basedchamp use "fuck" in a single chapter

love is about slurping hot soup together love is about knees knocking under cheap plastic tables love is about asian grandmas feeding you until you explode. this is scientifically proven btw

this was a bit of a longer one!! this fic is getting 2 be way longer than i thought it would be but we r making progress! thx for reading & being lovely as always <3

(p.s. if u dont know what a milo dinosaur is u need 2 try it rn!!! actually idk if they even sell milo in the west? to my knowledge its a seasian/australian thing, but milo dinosaur is the flavor of my childhood (and of most seasian kids out there) so if u get the chance, try it!

p.p.s. any non-native english speakers still get mixed up about tense sometimes? like ive been speaking this bitch of a language for over 15 years now but i still get my shit rocked by present and present perfect tense. what the fuck!!!! hate the english language fr)

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

in which silence is an act of confession, mandarin oranges are symbols of devotion, and there are an infinite number of ways to be a family

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They take two separate cars for the drive to Miramar: Ice leading their little convoy in his Cutlass, and Tori following behind in the family car with their parents. They insisted on coming with him on move-in day, even though there's not actually much to move in. He has a duffel bag's worth of clothes in the backseat, along with some cleaning supplies and a couple of framed photos in a grocery bag. Meanwhile, the other car is full to bursting with groceries—butcher meat and fresh produce and the brand of milk he likes, two different kinds of juice and the butter his mom buys for special occasions. Just an absolutely insane amount of food that he adamantly protested when he saw his parents loading the trunk; *I'm a grown man, Mom, I can do my own shopping. No, Dad, I won't starve and die if you don't give me a whole box of mandarin oranges.* But Ice got his bullheadedness from his parents, and so they, naturally, did not listen to a single word he said.

Ice is already categorizing his haul into groups: what he needs to cook and what he can put away, things he can store in the freezer and things that can hang around for a little bit in the fridge. All the vegetables he can throw in Maverick's direction, because lord knows that man has not eaten a single thing that's come from the ground in a frighteningly long time.

Ice and Family are pulling up to the curb next to his assigned housing by the time Ice finishes sorting out his food situation for the next month. It's a bland little thing, an off-white bungalow with a neatly trimmed lawn out in front. Not a porch or a portico in sight, but there does seem to be a backyard, judging from the wooden gate attached to the fence. Miles better than housing when he was a student at least, and infinitely better than any bunk he had on-ship.

He's getting his duffel out the backseat when he notices a motorcycle parked by the house next to his. It's a beast of a thing, tar-black and gleaming chrome. It's a very familiar bike, now that Ice thinks about it.

You've got to be kidding.

His dad, hefting a box of mandarin oranges, stops and sees it at the same time as he does.

"Hey, Tom, doesn't that look like the bike your friend rides?"

Ice has to physically stop himself from doing something stupid, like laugh or scream or throw an orange through his windshield. "Yeah, Dad. That's his alright," he says, face carefully blank. This is fine. This is normal. He should've anticipated this, actually. Of course they'd make him and Maverick neighbors: they're from the same TOPGUN class, they're the same age, and they're the same rank. Hell, the other house next to his, still seemingly empty, is probably going to be Slider's.

It's so early in the morning the sun is barely managing to keep itself in the sky. Ice prays to any god out there that Maverick decided to sleep in today. (It's a hopeless endeavor. Ice doesn't believe in praying. Or god.)

They're trudging their way across the lawn, Target bags in tow, when the man himself, Maverick Mitchell, stumbles out of his own house's side door, bleary-eyed and cheery. He jogs towards them, waving, and is altogether much too sunny for a man with self-proclaimed dysania who is currently awake at five-thirty in the morning.

His family is just as happy to see him. That night at the diner had made a lasting impression on his parents, and now Ice can't go one day without his parents asking him how his "sweet teacher friend" is doing, and when he's going to bring him around for dinner. They're never going to let it go now that they're neighbors.

"Hey neighbor," Maverick says, padding onto Ice's lawn. "It's nice to see you again, Mr. and Mrs. Kazansky. Tori."

He's barefoot, in plaid pajama pants and a crewneck with Bill the Goat on it. Toes sinking into damp grass, sleep lines creasing his cheek, the early morning light makes him look softer

around the edges—like someone rubbed a thumb on all the sharp angles of him until they smudged. Ice feels an overwhelming urge to walk into oncoming traffic.

“Mitchell,” Ice says instead. There’s no traffic this early in the morning.

“Good to see you again, Pete.” His dad shifts the box of oranges into the crook of an elbow and takes Maverick’s hand in a firm grip. Accepting a kiss on the cheek, Ice’s mom beams at him and gestures between the two houses. “We didn’t know you two were gonna be neighbors.”

Ice doesn’t even try to risk a glance at Tori. He can imagine the shit-eating grin on her face just fine. “We didn’t know, either.” He nods at Maverick and thinks that’s the end of it, continuing the trek across the lawn, but from behind him he hears Maverick say: “Hey, you guys have anything else that needs carrying?”

Goddamnit.

There’s so many grocery bags in the trunk that it’s starting to make their Ford Fiesta look like a clown car. Take one bag out, and three more appear. By the time they finish unloading the trunk and stocking the kitchen, dawn has well and truly elapsed into a more reasonable time of morning. Tori fiddles with the shitty coffee maker that came with the house and his parents bustle around the kitchen, making breakfast. Shooed away from the morning rituals and exiled until further notice, Ice sets off to start unpacking what measly belongings he’s brought with him, gesturing for Maverick to follow.

The only bedroom in the house is bright and airy, with white walls and beige trim and a standard queen. Ice would sleep anywhere as long as there’s a place to put his head down, but he’s grateful they made the accommodations so livable. Nice, even. He dumps his duffel and his bag of photos on the bed and gets to unpacking.

“So. Neighbors, huh?” Maverick says, sitting on the bed. He’s looking around the room even though Ice is sure his place is an exact carbon copy of Ice’s.

“Looks like it.” Ice hangs up his uniform and reminds himself to iron the sleeves later tonight.

There’s a pause. And then, “You alright with that?”

He keeps hanging up his clothes, fusses with the closet bar that’s just an inch from straight. There’s something almost hesitant in Maverick’s tone, unsure and wrong-footed and so, so unlike him. Ice doesn’t turn around to look. He doesn’t know what he would see if he did. “Course, Mitchell. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Maverick doesn’t respond. Instead, Ice hears the rustle of plastic, the telltale creak of weight shifting on a bed frame.

“Holy shit, is this baby Ice?”

Ice finally turns and faces a grinning Maverick, all evidence of uncertainty washed away like it was never there to begin with. He’s holding a modest silver frame, and in it, a faded photo of the Kazansky family getting sunburned on a beach. His mom and dad, in matching black shades. Tori, barely one year old, cradled in their dad’s arms, and him, scowling at the camera in a baseball cap comically large for a toddler. He’s clutching at their mom’s finger like it’s the only thing keeping him from mauling the cameraman.

“God, it is. The frown gives it away.” Maverick’s holding the picture like it’s a check for a million dollars, fingers light and gentle on the frame.

Ice frowns snap-quick, like it’s instinct, and Maverick laughs, like it’s instinct too.

He turns back to the closet and starts filling a drawer with his rolled-up socks. “Could have made yourself useful and started sweeping the floors or something, you know.”

“Nah, think I’ll just stay right here,” Maverick hums, and continues rustling around in the plastic bag.

Nary a seagull outside, the room is blessedly quiet, aside from all of Maverick’s snooping. Ice should really be more irritated by that, but he can’t scrounge up enough bite within himself to tell Maverick off. Too early in the day, maybe. Or maybe he’s just getting soft. Dust motes twirl around in the sunlight streaming in from the windows, and Ice’s mind is completely and utterly still. There’s usually a lot of clamoring going on in there, contrary to popular belief, and it really only gets like this when he’s up in the air. Not willing to look a gift horse in the mouth, Ice is just grateful for the reprieve, and continues to fold up his undershirts.

The rustling stops. “Hey,” Maverick says. “You kept them.”

Ice looks over his shoulder and glances at what Maverick’s holding up to the light; it’s one of the polaroids he mailed him, the F-14 one, corners creased and still stinking faintly of saltwater.

“Yeah. Why would I throw them away?” Ice asks, even though what he really wants to say is: *What’s up with you today? Or, What’s wrong? And what can I do to help?*

Maverick shrugs and smooths a thumb over the crinkled edge, tries to smooth it out through sheer force of will. Ice puts away his last shirt and stills for a minute, still facing the closet. Finally, he turns to Maverick.

“Think they’re about finished with breakfast by now?”

Carefully tucking the photo back into the grocery bag, Maverick gets to his feet. “Let’s find out.”

In the time it took for Ice to put away one bag's worth of clothes and for Maverick to snoop through his things, his family had taken it upon themselves to make a feast fit for a king. They come back to a table laden with enough food to be a breakfast buffet. There's a skillet of potato frittata smack dab in the middle, like it's the *pièce de résistance*, with an assortment of miscellaneous food items orbiting it. A stack of toast on a plate, and some cut-up watermelon on another. A salad bowl filled with mandarins, and a smaller bowl full of oatmeal. A hand of bananas on one end of the table, and jugs of juice on the other. Tori, already seated and pouring coffee into a cup.

"Hey," Tori greets them, sipping her mug. "Come eat while it's hot."

They slip into their seats, Ice next to Tori and Maverick next to Ice. Tori kicks him under the table.

"Holy shit," Maverick says under his breath. "You guys eat like this all the time?"

Ice shakes his head. "Not usually. Probably because it's moving-in day." *Or maybe they're trying to impress you*, he doesn't say. God knows Maverick has enough ego to blow the roof off the house.

His parents sit across the three of them, signalling the start of their haphazard feast. "You want anything else, Pete? There's a lot still left in the kitchen," his mom says, eyes warm.

"Oh, god Mrs. Kazansky, this is already so much. I'm alright. Thank you." Maverick's shifting in his chair, barely enough to be noticeable, and he smiles at Ice's mom. They're both so equally charmed by the other that Ice is starting to wonder if he should be concerned for his parents' marriage.

Ice reaches over for the coffee and starts to fill his mug while Maverick goes for the apple juice. "Remind me when the next batch of students are coming in, again?" Tori asks.

"This Friday," Ice and Maverick say, both turning to raise an eyebrow at the other. "Next week's when school starts," Maverick continues, setting down the jug of juice. "Hey, Ice, can you pass the—"

Ice hands over the bowl of oatmeal and twists a banana off the bunch, passing it to Maverick as well. He spoons a generous helping of frittata on his own plate; his dad doesn't make this for breakfast often, but when he does, Ice always makes sure to get a good serving of it for himself. Food for the gods, is what it is.

The food is so good Ice barely hears the question.

"You excited for your first class, Tom?" his dad asks.

Ice shrugs. "Excited enough. It should be nice to be on the other end for once."

"Oh, it is," Maverick says. "Trust me. We're not the ones getting yelled at anymore."

Glancing at him, Ice snorts. "I don't know about you, Mitchell, but I wasn't getting yelled at back at TOPGUN."

"Bit of a troublemaker, Pete?" Tori says, crunching down on a slice of buttered toast. There's that glint in her eye again. The one Ice doesn't like.

"Who, me?" Maverick raises his eyebrows in mock affront, trying to tamp down a smile. "Never."

"We really should be going," Tori says, after every spoon and plate and pan in the house is clean and dry again, tucked away in their drawers and cabinets. "I've got that. Test thing. That I need to do."

Ice levels Tori with the stare that's stopped working on her since she was eight. "It's Sunday."

“Medical school knows no bounds. It’s terrible. Anyway! I’ll be in the car.” She squeezes his shoulder and hustles her way out the door, but not before saying, “Good to see you again, Pete. You should swing by for dinner soon.” And before Maverick can even open his mouth to reply, she’s gone.

Ice sighs. The day Tori learns subtlety is the day the sky turns purple. He leans in to give his mom a hug, and then his dad. “Tell Tori to drive safe, yeah? I’ll see you guys tomorrow for lunch. You sure you don’t need me for anything today? I’ve been meaning to look over the car—”

“Tom,” his mom says, flicking his ear. “We’ll be fine. Just settle into your new place first, okay?”

“You can take a look at the car next time, kid.” His dad turns to Maverick and grasps his shoulder. “And you’re welcome to visit anytime, alright? There’s a place at the dinner table back at the house with your name on it.”

Maverick fumbles for the barest second, smiles and says a polite thank you, and then says another polite thank you for the breakfast. Then as sudden as they came, the Kazansky brigade is gone, the rumble of an engine muffled through the walls. It’s just Maverick and Ice, and entirely too many mandarins for a single person.

“You’re gonna help me finish these before they rot,” Ice says, picking one up. He digs his fingers into the skin and starts peeling.

“You know, I’ve never actually had one of these,” Maverick says, taking one from the salad bowl as well.

Ice raises an eyebrow. “Never had an orange before?” He stacks the rinds on the kitchen counter, and the bright, cloying scent of citrus fills the air, sweet enough to taste.

“No, dumbass. A mandarin, specifically.” His peeling is much clumsier than Ice’s, and slower too; Ice has his peeled just as Maverick reaches the halfway mark.

“Hey!” Maverick yelps as Ice takes his mandarin. He replaces it with a bowl of his own, peeled and segmented. “I was just about to finish that one.” Ice can practically hear the pout in his voice.

He shakes his head. “No you were not. Stick to flying, Mitchell.”

Maverick glares at him, popping a mandarin segment into his mouth. They fall into silence again, just like in the bedroom, and it’s not uncomfortable, really—but it’s just not what Ice expected from Maverick. Not for the first time, Ice wonders if there’s something on his mind. Or maybe this is just what he’s like, under all the confetti.

“Hey, Ice?”

“Hm?” Ice mutters, sectioning a mandarin. He deposits them into the bowl that’s steadily emptying, Maverick going through them at a near alarming speed.

“Your family is really nice.”

Ice looks up. Maverick’s picking at the orange pith, not meeting his eyes.

He picks up another mandarin and starts to peel. “Yeah. Yeah, they are,” he says. “Tori can be a little shit sometimes, though. Or a lot of the time.” Ice can see Maverick smile in his peripheral.

“I don’t know, I think she’s nice. Smart as a whip, too.”

“We can agree on the second part.”

Quiet, again. Ice thinks they can get through the whole salad bowl if Maverick keeps this up. Maybe the whole box, too.

“How ‘bout your family?” Ice says. Pushes the words out into sweet-smelling air like he’s leaving dried corn out for game. Bait, maybe, but in the end, it’s up to Maverick if he wants to take it or not.

Maverick shrugs. “Carole and Bradley are doing alright. Better now.”

Ice is about to say something quippy like, *nice try, but that wasn’t the question*, right up until things click in his head. “You speak to them recently?”

“Drove down to Houston last week. Took Bradley to the museum—the one with like, the dinosaur bones and shit. It was nice. Carole got a break for the weekend.” He’s gripping the bowl of mandarins like it’s a lifeline.

Ice pretends not to see it. “That’s nice, Maverick. Good that you still keep in touch.”

“Yeah.” Maverick exhales, deep and long. “We talk on the landline every week. It’s good to hear from them.”

Ice hums, drops more mandarin segments in the bowl. Maverick nibbles away at them, and they stand like that for a while, leaning against the counter, quiet and smelling of citrus in Ice’s sunlit kitchen.

Ice knows Slider has arrived before he even sets eyes on him. No, it’s not because he has special Slider senses that tingle whenever he’s close, although Ice wouldn’t rule that out entirely; it’s because Slider’s pickup has the noisiest engine in San Diego. Possibly in the whole of California.

He can hear that goddamn truck trundling from miles away, and it's here right now, in this very neighborhood, on this very street. Ice walks out to greet him, standing on the sidewalk by the empty house next to his.

Slider rolls down the window and waves. A minute later, he parks, gets out of the car, and opens the door for Jenny.

"Ice!" Slider hustles over to him and gives him a solid, hefty nudge. "Fucking neighbors, huh?"

"Yeah," Ice says, deadpan. "Guess who else we're neighbors with." He steps aside to let Slider take a good, long look at the motorcycle two houses over from his.

"Hey, isn't that—"

"Good to see you, Jenny," Ice greets as she catches up to them.

"—shit, it is!"

She grins at him from under the brim of her sunhat. "Hey, Ice. Kiss any birds, lately?"

Ice scowls. "No, Jenny. I have not."

Slider elbows him in the ribs. "Ice. That's Maverick's bike."

"I've gathered, Slider. We're all neighbors. Ate breakfast and everything in my house a couple hours ago."

Both Slider and Jenny's eyebrows shoot up, threatening to jump off their foreheads. "Together?" Slider asks.

"Yeah, with my family. We bumped into each other on the lawn." Ice walks towards the truck. "Hey, you guys need any help with unloading?"

"You can grab all the cleaning shit in the back," Slider says. "Wait, you two ate breakfast together? With your family? Can you expound on this a little bit?"

Ice grabs Slider's cleaning supplies in one hand and flips him off with the other, walking to the house. Behind him, Jenny's laughter rings out, clear and bright as the sky above them, and it's a good day today. Weird as shit, but just as good.

"—Ice, you incredible dumbass, this is your chance!"

Unimpressed, Ice continues to shuffle around the food in Slider's cupboard, moving the perishables up front. "Slider, do you even hear yourself right now?"

"Do you?" Slider's voice is starting to fray around the edges, incredulous and more than a little irritated. Jenny watches on from her perch on the counter, observing their back-and-forth like it's a tennis match.

"I sound like a perfectly sane man who doesn't want to get punched in the face. Or go to jail."

"We've already established Maverick is not the type to do that kind of thing!"

"And I'm not the type to do stupid, reckless shit without knowing what's going to happen at the end of it all," Ice says, jaw clenching. If he's going to jump into a pool, he's going to need

to know how deep it is first. That's how he's lived his entire life, and that's what allows him to fly the way he does, act the way he does—be the way he is. It's in his nature, this hyper-vigilant urge he has to check every dark corner of every room. And it's done him very well so far, made him graduate at the top of every class, ace every test both in and out of the military. People who had the balls used to come up to him sometimes and ask him, *How'd you do it? Who did you sell your soul to? How'd you become untouchable?*

Ice smirked every single time they asked, straightened his shoulders and spine like the cockiest motherfucker alive. *Just born like this*, he'd say, like a gloat or a quip or a mix of both. Made a show of it to coat over the fact that it was true. He was born like this. Born distrusting the doctor that delivered him. He doesn't know any other way to be.

Ice stacks all the cans, the soups and the mixed fruits and the beans, in the back of the cupboard. He doesn't speak.

Slider sighs and moves to sit on the counter, stops to consider the flimsy laminate, and grabs a chair instead. "I'm not saying you should go up and tell him you're in love with him tomorrow, Ice. Just. I don't know. Fucking test the waters or some shit. You're gonna get a tug back on the line, is all I'm saying. It's not reckless if he feels the same way."

Mind whirring, Ice is still stuck on the first part. "Who says I'm in love with him?"

Both Jenny and Slider stare at him, uncomprehending for a moment. "Are you—" Jenny starts, but a loud knocking interrupts their little vigil in the kitchen.

"Slider? That you? Pretty sure that's your hot ass car out in front!"

Ice sighs. Speak of the devil and he shall appear, but the devil is always, always Maverick Mitchell.

He's put it all out of his mind by the following morning. The entirety of yesterday was spent trying to glare discreetly at Slider and Jenny while they not-so-discreetly tried to prod Maverick for any and all information they deemed relevant to their nefarious interests, but today is a new day. He's going to head over to the house and take a look at the family car, and then he's going to eat a delicious fucking lunch, and he's going to remove all thoughts of Slider and Jenny and *especially* Maverick from his brain and throw them out the window.

The drive to La Jolla is quick and easy this time of morning, and is spent glaring at birds and road signs and asphalt. By the time he turns onto their narrow street, he's pretty certain he's got all the scowling out of his system. He's calm. He's relaxed. He's looking forward to turning his brain off and rolling under their Ford Fiesta. He's pretty sure their transmission fluid needed to be changed out many, many moons ago.

It's too early in the morning to call out his arrival when he steps into the house, so Ice makes a beeline for the coffeemaker and starts a pot. Rolling up his sleeves, he walks out the side door and into the garage, and starts fiddling with the little radio they keep there. There's a station solely dedicated to playing Joy Division from 0600 to 0900, and Ice intends to find it.

He does. He lowers the volume until it's a low murmur, sets the car up on the floor jack, and rolls under the chassis. His brain quiets down like it always does when he has something that needs finishing, and he's deeply, wildly relieved.

His dad walks into the garage not even half an hour later.

"Morning, Tom."

"Hey, dad," Ice says, except it's more of a 'heaeugh' because there's a screwdriver in his mouth.

"You didn't have any breakfast before rolling under there?"

Another incomprehensible noise.

“Later, then. Need any help?”

More of a garble, this time.

“You tell that kid you’re in love with him, yet?”

Ice almost brains himself on the transmission.

“Did I *what* that I’m *what*?” There’s still a screwdriver in his mouth. He spits it out and rolls out from under the car, stares at his dad flat on his back. “Did I *what* that I’m *what*?” he repeats.

There’s an odd, tinny sound ringing in his ears, like white noise. That’s odd. The radio they bought for the garage isn’t even a year old yet.

His dad holds a hand out to help him up, but Ice doesn’t take it. He’s pretty sure he’d pass out instantly if he tried to get up now. Standing above him awkwardly, his dad shifts on the balls of his feet. “Sorry. That was sudden. I’m gathering that you haven’t.”

Ice blinks. He realizes the ringing isn’t coming from the radio, and for the first time in a long, long time, he’s speechless. Rendered mute, not of his own accord, but because he has no idea what the fuck he’s supposed to say. Deciding that it’s not worth it to stand anymore, his dad crouches down next to him instead, face open and earnest and—

Nervous. His dad is nervous. Why the fuck is he nervous, when Ice is the one on the edge of a cliff he knows he’s about to fall from?

You tell that kid you’re in love with him yet? Ice can’t decide which is worse: that his dad said *he*, because he knows, or that the *him* in question is referring to the one person Ice is running away from today.

There's a lot of things Ice can say before his feet find the precipice of this goddamned cliff. "I don't know what you're talking about," are the words that come out of his mouth, a last-ditch effort to get off this fucking mountain.

And then suddenly, like Ice has flipped a switch, his dad looks crestfallen, all the light leaked out of him. It sits so, so wrong in Ice's chest; something so undoubtedly terrible about putting that look on his father's face, but before he can backtrack and come up with something else to say, his dad puts a hand on his shoulder. Squeezes tight.

"That's our fault. We never said anything."

Ice stares at him, wordless. Uncomprehending.

"We know, Tom. We've known for a while now. It's never been a problem." He squeezes his shoulder, again. "It will never be a problem, you understand?"

Ice nods, except he barely hears him over the roar of his own heart, beating like it's trying to escape from his chest.

"Now. This thing between you and that nice friend of yours. You need to do something about it. I don't know what you kids do nowadays to court each other, but whatever it is: you get on that, alright? I've never seen you look at someone like that before, and your mother and I have been excited about it." He claps Ice on the shoulder one last time and stands up to leave. Before he slips through the side door, though, he stops to look at Ice.

"You know I love you, right?"

And that's the thing about his dad: he's got the kind of eyes you don't say no to. He has crows feet and laugh lines and the beginnings of a bald spot Ice and Tori tease him about. Never lied a day in his life. So sweet he got the prettiest girl in New York to move across the country to be with him. Sturdy and reliable and good, deep in his bones, who shined Ice's shoes every day before school until Ice was old enough to tell him to stop; who curls up in the armchair by the front door when his kids are out late so he knows when they get home. Who cried when Ice left for Basic, unashamed and splotchy in the face and confused about

why Ice was embarrassed. Salt of the earth, blood of Ice's blood, his father's got the kind of eyes you don't say no to.

So Ice swallows and says, "Yeah."

His dad smiles and turns to leave, but before he can shut the door:

"Love you too."

Quiet. So quiet it's probably drowned out by the radio. His dad smiles wider anyway, like he knows, and leaves Ice alone in the garage, still flat on his back on the creeper.

He breathes long and steady until his mental faculties have straightened themselves out. Digs his fingers into the concrete floor, a little, just to make sure. After his heart returns to its usual slow crawl, he rolls back under the car to finish the job he started.

Goddamnit. Where'd he put that screwdriver.

Chapter End Notes

IVE BEEN GONE. but i am back now ^__^

i tried to shove as many callbacks in this as humanly possible. (also as many tropes bc three cheers for self-indulgence!!!) slaps roof of car this bad boy can fit so many cliches. also also has anyone noticed that i just keep. adding chapters. like this was supposed 2 be over at chapter 5 & we are now at 7 i promise this is wrapping up soon!!! sry we r moving at a snails pace ice is being more difficult than i expected him 2 be (aka i did not anticipate how invested i would become until the chapters got longer and longer & now we r here 20k words later)

ok thats it gn!!!! ty for reading as always appreciate it lots

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

in which mothers know best, an IOU is paid in full, and drowning and loving are the same kind of fear

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The first memory Ice remembers is of drowning. He can still recall the day it happened in near-perfect detail, the whole timeline of events that led up to it crystal-clear and shining. The dusty walk to the beach, the packed lunch, the cloudless sky and the hot, hot sand. The smell of sunscreen, pungent and chemical and sticking to the back of his throat.

His mother, ever the science teacher, tried to explain the how's and why's of saltwater to him as he floated on his back just a couple feet from the shore. "It's much, much denser than freshwater," she said, thigh-deep and watching over him. "Remember when we talked about density? That's why you're floating right now."

Squinting at the sun, he said, "Like all the salt is holding me up?"

"Exactly like that," she replied, pleased, even though he learned later that it wasn't exactly like that. More like *close enough*, really, but it was enough for his mom, and she was always a sucker for positive affirmation.

The sky was so blue it hurt to look at it. Almost neon, even, and the white-hot sun stark against it. But his dad had insisted they go at this exact time, said it had to be this window of hours in the afternoon to catch the low-tide. The ocean was practically asleep—on his back and weightless, he was practically asleep too.

It took one wave to break the sleepy peace of their family day out. His dad always tells this story like it's an action movie. He likes to exaggerate the height of the wave's crest every time he recounts the harrowing tale. It was six feet tall at last year's Thanksgiving dinner, and

it's probably going to double in size this year at the next opportunity he has to retell the story. It was massive, his dad says every single time. Came out of nowhere. The calmest, quietest ocean you've ever seen and then boom—

Tom was under.

People usually object by the time Ice's dad gets to this part of the story.

Under? And no one had the chance to pull him out before the wave hit?

That's the thing, his dad says every time. *No one even saw it coming.*

The thing Ice remembers best is the pressure. The unimaginable pull of the undercurrent, like the ocean was trying to take him for itself. 10,000 newtons of force trapping him in its fist, and no matter how much he kicked his feet, the water just kept pulling him further down. It was impossible to get out, impossible to breathe, impossible to think. It was saltwater and deafening white noise and no exit, rushing water and the heavy thud of his heartbeat.

And then the wave passed. A hand closed around his wrist and wrenched him up, his father's face wild and panicked and so, so relieved. Wailing cries from the shore, Tori screaming in their mother's arms like it was the end of the world. It definitely felt like the end of the world to Ice.

They had lunch after. Cucumber and mayo sandwiches warmed by the sun, watered down iced tea because even the thermos couldn't take the heat. That was the day Ice decided he was going to be the best swimmer that ever lived. No way he was gonna be bested by *water*.

He didn't become the best swimmer that ever lived. He did, however, become swimming state champ three years in a row in high school, so, you know—he didn't do *too* bad.

The Kazansky Sunday Family Lunch is in session the moment Tori manages to drag Ice out of the garage. A steaming platter of potato pancakes, Old Mrs. Fletcher's Special Macaroni Salad, and a pitcher of mint julep—all indicators of his day getting better from here on out. Mrs. Fletcher's macaroni is legend around these parts.

He takes a pancake and pops it into his mouth, like usual, and his mom flicks him on the ear, like usual.

"Don't eat like an animal, Tom." She bustles around, putting coasters under cups as he grins at her.

It's good to be back home.

It takes less than thirty minutes for him to take back everything he previously thought about home and family. Get him the fuck out of here.

"Guys, I'd really appreciate it if—"

"We're just saying, Tom, it's very clear to us that what you're feeling is reciproc—"

"And like, this whole will-they-won't-they thing is boring by now. Get on with it, you fucking—"

"Tori, mind your language. But she's right Tom, you should know by now that—"

(He does. He does know. He's not an idiot. He has feelings for Mitchell, and Mitchell, most likely, reciprocates those same feelings. That's not the fucking problem.)

Ice squeezes his eyes shut and tries not to scream. He wishes he drowned in that fucking ocean. But like a miracle from heaven, from one second to the next, the clamor surrounding the dining table abruptly stops.

A hand closes around his wrist. Twice as small and twice as callused. He opens his eyes and looks at his mom, her downturned lips and creased forehead, and for one heartstopping moment Beth Kazansky looks her age. Ice is filled with the overwhelming need to make her stop frowning, make her stop looking at him like there's something wrong. To apologize, for concerning her. For being the way he is.

His father and sister don't speak.

"What are you afraid of, baby?" She asks him.

That's a funny question. Ice doesn't even know the answer to it himself. *Everything, maybe. Losing my job. Losing my house, my benefits, my insurance. Losing the respect of my friends and colleagues. Losing the one thing I've dedicated my whole life to. Losing my identity. Who the fuck am I if I'm not a pilot, Ma?*

And Ma, Ice doesn't say, that's just top layer stuff. The thing is— the thing is I'm real scared of him, Ma. See? I can't even say his name. Not out loud, not in my head, not anywhere. I'm terrified. Of what he makes me feel. What he could do to me.

Mom, he thinks, looking at her, eyes the exact same blue as his own. He could do anything to me. Terrible, terrible things. And you know me. I'm like a dog with a bone. I don't let go. I can't.

Of course, he doesn't say any of this.

Of course, she understands anyway. His mom gives his wrist a squeeze, once, twice, and puts another potato pancake on his plate.

His father and sister, staring at the two of them like they're wondering why they just stared at each other for a minute in silence.

“Okay, enough with Tom’s melodrama. Let’s talk about this bitch in my biochem class—”

“Tori! Language!”

His mother sends him off with a Tupperware of macaroni salad and a kiss on the cheek.

“Sorry that we pushed you today,” she says, all 5’4 of her reaching up to wipe an oil stain from his neck.

Ice immediately feels like the biggest, shittiest asshole in the world. “Don’t apologize. It’s me stuff.”

“Well. It’s you stuff that we won’t annoy you about, anymore. Drive safe, honey,” she says with one final swipe at his neck.

He waits by the sidewalk until she reaches the door, but before he can take a step toward his parked car, she says, “Just one last thing. Last. Promise.” Her voice carries in the still, muggy air.

She frowns in thought, like she’s thinking about the correct way to word it. “The thing about love that no one tells you, Tom, is that it’s all fear.” She smiles. “All of it. I love your father and I’m scared shitless of a life without him in it.”

A laugh escapes from him without his permission. His mom laughs too.

“Every single day Tori walks out the house, I’m afraid. That something could happen to her—that she says the wrong thing to the wrong person. That this is the day she’s going to get in trouble for her mouth. And I’m most terrified of you, Tom,” she says, leaning against the

doorframe. “Everytime you get on a ship, get on a plane, it feels like I’m dying, a little. My baby boy, somewhere in the world that I can’t reach.”

Ice swallows.

“And it’s horrible. But that’s the nature of loving. You’re so, so afraid but you let them in anyway. You let them in because,” a pause, here. “Because life is so much sweeter with them in it. Even with the fear.” She shifts, putting her hand on the doorknob. “Or at least, that’s what I think. But I’m surrounded by so many wonderful people, so maybe there’s some truth there.”

One final smile at him. “Remember to eat, Tom. If I see your fridge empty the next time I visit, you’ll have something much, much worse to be afraid of.”

His mom slips inside and shuts the door with a gentle click, and for a dizzying minute Ice doesn’t know where he is or what he was doing. His mom just monologued at him for a good five minutes and then violently threatened him shortly after.

He gets in the car, starts it and stares at the clock. 3:06.

He wonders what Maverick is up to.

This afternoon, Ice takes the long way back to Miramar.

Maverick comes to collect on the bet he made with Ice bright and early on a Monday morning.

“Need any help with that, soldier?” Hair wet, uniform wrinkled at the sleeves, he bounces into Ice’s temp office with a smile way too wide for six a.m.

“If you can make yourself useful.” Ice pulls out a feather duster and a rag, pointing them at the ancient window blinds. “Feel free.”

Mav wrinkles his nose at him but takes them, staring at the window like it offends him. “I have allergies.”

“I have Kleenex.”

Ice finishes emptying out his box of meager belongings. A pen cup, a picture frame, not much else. Folding his arms, he leans against the desk and drinks Maverick in, bathed in early morning light and dust motes. He’s on his tip-toes as he dusts off the top of the window.

“There’s no way you came here to clean my windows out of the goodness of your heart.”

Maverick doesn’t even pause. “You wound me, Ice.”

Ice raises an eyebrow at the back of Maverick’s head and doesn’t say a word. It’s the easiest way to get Mav talking.

It pays off. “Besides the fact that I’m a selfless angel—I’m here to ask if you’re free tonight. To, you know, hold up your end of the bet.” A particularly large cloud of dust springs up from the window blinds. Maverick sneezes.

“Oh, so there was an agenda,” Ice says, handing him a tissue. “I’ll swing by tonight. You have stuff?”

He can’t see Maverick’s face but he can hear the grimace in his voice when he says, “Um. Does a half carton of eggs count as stuff?”

Ice smiles. “I’ll bring the stuff too. You saw how much shit my parents dropped off last time.”

Mav snorts. “Enough to feed an army.”

“Or one you.”

“Yeah. Or one me.”

The window is spotless by the time Maverick finishes. He steps back, sidling up next to Ice to admire his handiwork. “Look at that. Brand spanking new.”

“Hey, if this whole pilot thing doesn’t work out...”

Maverick smiles at him. “You’re looking at the best damn window cleaner this side of Cal—” He sneezes again. “Fuck. I told you I have allergies.”

Ice is in front of Maverick’s door at half past six, two bags of groceries hanging from his wrists. If he’s going to cook dinner because of a stupid bet, he might as well do it right. He needs to empty out his fridge quick, in any case.

It’s a nice night for a good dinner. Purple-pink sky, cool air. He breathes long and steady, mentally preparing himself for an evening that should be mundane. Normal. Two guys having dinner because they’re friends. Buddies. He briefly thinks of Slider, wonders if he’d wanna come over for dinner too, and just as quickly dismisses it. No way in hell is he inviting that hellion, and Mav didn’t mention it either.

He knocks on the door before he seems like too much of a creep.

Silence, and then footsteps. The door opens and with it, warm light spills out onto the porch.

Maverick, smiling at him in jeans and a faded band shirt. Bare feet on laminated wood.
“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Glad you could make it.”

Ice raises an eyebrow. “We live next to each other.”

“Shut up. Come in,” Mav says, opening the door wider.

Ice steps inside, the taste of saltwater sticking to the back of his throat. Under the floorboards, under all the concrete and grass and dirt, something shifts.

Chapter End Notes

HIIIIII its been 23 years um. hi <3 i told myself i would b finishing this no matter what & i meant it!!! see u soon ^—^ idt ill be able to answer all the comments ive received since the last update but just know i appreciate every single one so so so much i cant even begin to word how much they mean to me. thx ily mwa see u for the finale

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

in which garlic is minced, a table is set, and mav and ice find their own way

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Maverick's house is the mirror-image version of Ice's own, identical down to the welcome mat.

"So, Ice." Maverick ushers him in, tugging on the plastic bags dangling from his hands. He lets Maverick take them. "What're you making for me tonight?"

Ice takes off his shoes and lines them up by the door. He bustles over towards the counter Maverick dropped his things on and doesn't let himself smile. "What, not up for a surprise?"

Maverick snorts. "Fuck no. For all I know, this dinner's actually a special op to poison me."

"If I wanted to kill you, Mav, I'd have done it a long time ago," Ice says, and gets to work.

He's halfway into pouring rice in a pot when Mav comes over to peer around his shoulder and asks, "Need any help with that?"

Ice doesn't let himself slow, takes the pot and runs it under a sink. "No, Mav. Sit your ass down and let me cook you dinner." He might be showing his hand here. What, with the invite, it's high time he started reciprocating.

He hears Mav hum behind him and doesn't turn around.

“Rice?”

“Rice,” Ice says. After rinsing out his final wash, he sets the pot aside on the stove for later. All the houses on base are still using gas, but at least it isn’t the kind that has to have a match held up to the burner first.

Mav makes another thinking noise, now rummaging around in the fridge. He produces two beers and pops the caps off on the counter edge before holding one out to Ice. “You making me sushi, Ice?”

“Yes,” Ice says, pulling out a pale orange squash from his bag of tricks. “Yes, I’m making you sushi, Mav.”

By the time it takes Ice to chop one squash, dice two onions, and mince an unseemly amount of garlic, Mav has asked if he could be of any help three whole times. It seems this final “no” has gotten to him, as he’s tucked into a couch watching the Phillies get their asses beat. His fingers are curled around the neck of the half-empty bottle he’s been nursing, condensation dripping onto the couch cushions.

Cheers from the TV set. Ice heats up oil in a second pot and doesn’t look.

Mav is looking over his shoulder again. Ice didn’t even notice him get up from the sofa. “Holy shit, that smells amazing.”

Unwillingly, Ice feels himself smile. The oil pops and sizzles around garlic and onion and the kitchen is warm.

“Are you sure we can’t eat yet?”

Ice sighs. “Patience, Mav.”

Maverick snorts, barely loud enough to be heard over TV commentary, and Ice can’t disagree with that.

Sitting cross-legged on linoleum flooring, Mav watches the oven as squash puckers and roasts on a tray. Ice watches him in the meanwhile, his face and hands and bare ankles illuminated by buttery light. “You know that’s not gonna make it cook faster,” he says, just to get a reaction.

Maverick rolls his eyes so far back the oven light makes the whites of his eyes shine orange. “And you know standing there watching me isn’t gonna do anything for you, either.”

And, well. What can Ice say to that.

“Will you do the honors?” Ice asks, shoulder aching. He’s been stirring this pot for what feels like five years, now.

Mav grins at him. He shakes salt into his palm first before sprinkling it carefully into the pot, just like Ice taught him. Then, pepper. Then, sage; barely a pinch. Ice stirs and scoops up a little for Mav to taste.

He leans in and catches the wooden spoon between his teeth instead of taking the handle. A beat. Then, a smile. Warm, earthy risotto bubbling in a pot, squash-orange and thick.

“It’s perfect.”

He gets to the ladle before Ice does, bastard, and scoops a hearty serving into Ice's bowl, then his. He takes two bites before Ice can even get a word in, and he does that thing with his face when he eats really good food, or someone laughs at a joke he's particularly proud of, or a student does a picture-perfect Immelman. Ice washes down the warm thing in his chest with even warmer beer. He takes a bite of his own and hums, satisfied. Maybe a little bit more sage next time. He tells Mav as much.

Mav grins, gleeful. "Shut the fuck up," he says, and more seriously, "this is delicious, Ice. Thanks for cooking."

Ice shrugs. "I'm a man of my word."

Something passes over Maverick's face, then. "That you are."

The TV's still on and Ice can't hear a single word of it. He opens his mouth to speak at the same time Mav does, and they both back off for the first time in their lives. Mav bites the bullet first.

"The first time I met Mrs. Tan, she caught me yakking into her flowerbed at two in the morning," Mav says, smiling. It's not a very happy smile. "It's maybe the drunkest I've ever been in my life. No, that's a lie— the second drunkest."

He takes another bite of his risotto before continuing. "I was stumbling around like a lunatic downtown, miracle I wasn't robbed or stabbed or something. Chanced across her place and locked eyes with those orchids and sick to my stomach, I didn't stand a chance. Couldn't see or walk straight." He laughs, and he doesn't look anywhere near Ice. "Just full on vomited in a sweet lady's flowers, and apparently I was making such a ruckus she came out to check on the commotion. A whole story above the restaurant and she heard me."

Mav twirls the spoon in his fingers and resolutely stares down at his bowl. "It's why she has new ones. Prettier ones, if you remember from when we went." And Ice does, remembers

summer colors blooming in front of a dilapidated front door and feeling confused as all hell. “Replaced them ‘cause it was only right. But she didn’t even ask me to. Just rubbed my back and brought me inside and made me drink beef broth.” He laughs a weak, little thing. Ice doesn’t say anything. Doesn’t ask the obvious question.

In usual Maverick fashion, he takes it head-on, eyes meeting Ice’s. “She asked me what on earth I was doing, being a fool at that late an hour. I told her everything. 1986’s most tragic hits. It just kept coming.” Here, he takes a deep breath. Sets the spoon down, not once looking away from Ice.

“I told her that honestly– that night, I was just missing you.”

Smiles, again. Looks away, again.

Ice can feel his breath in his chest and his pulse in his head. He puts his own spoon down, metal sweaty from his own clammy hands, and stands up from his chair. Even his shirt is sticking to his back, damp everywhere. He takes one step towards Maverick, two, and Mav looks a mix between defiant and resigned and hopeful. All three, all at once.

Ice thinks about his dad kneeling in the garage and his mom, arms crossed on the porch. Tori in a sunlight-filled kitchen. Slider, watching from across a deck and across a diner and across a shitbox of a truck. Thinks about himself, his heart in his head and arms and legs, anywhere but his chest. Mav alone and lonely at two in the morning, lost in a part of the city he didn’t know. Only a stranger to rub his back and keep him company. Suddenly, he thinks about nothing at all. Suddenly, blindingly, shockingly, he realizes his decision had been made before he’d even stepped foot off that damn ship.

Ice looks down at him, steady eye contact and steady breath and steady heart. “I missed you too,” he says, and the relief is cool in his chest. He cups a hand around the back of Maverick’s neck, leans down, and kisses him.

A sharp intake of breath. Then, Maverick hauls him in closer, fists a hand in Ice’s gross, sweaty shirt, kisses him back, and all Ice can think is *finally, finally, finally*. Mav tastes like the risotto, tastes like earth and salt and too little sage. Ice wants to kiss him until he doesn’t taste like anything. Ice wants to eat him whole, which is maybe not a normal thought but who the fuck cares anymore.

His neck is starting to cramp. Ice breaks away, panting, but Maverick follows him, pushes him out, out, and into the living room, onto the couch. Mav sits beside him, barely any room, fingers tangled together. Watching, watching, watching. Getting his fill, maybe. Lord knows Ice is.

The TV is still on, obnoxiously loud this close, light framing Mav at the edges and lighting him up soft-white, and okay, maybe Ice doesn't mind the TV. Slider's gonna freak, and then Jenny'll freak. His parents will be over-fucking-joyed. Tori will be insufferable for the next year. The risotto is going to go cold. Did he leave the oven on? He can't remember if he left the oven on.

"Come here," Mav says, softly.

Ice goes.

He's a soldier, after all.

Chapter End Notes

MY GOD. labor of love was really not joking about the labor part. the latter half of this fic was a struggle for me, but if ur reading this im glad that u stuck around. mav is a little sad and ice is a little unsure but they got there eventually & so did i <3 what is romance if not cooking risotto for the guy u would risk ur life for what is love if not making do with what you have (tshirts instead of trivets and long convoluted stories of drunkenness instead of i love you's). thank you so so much for sticking w/ this little turned semi-long story, no words to describe how much i appreciate it <3

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